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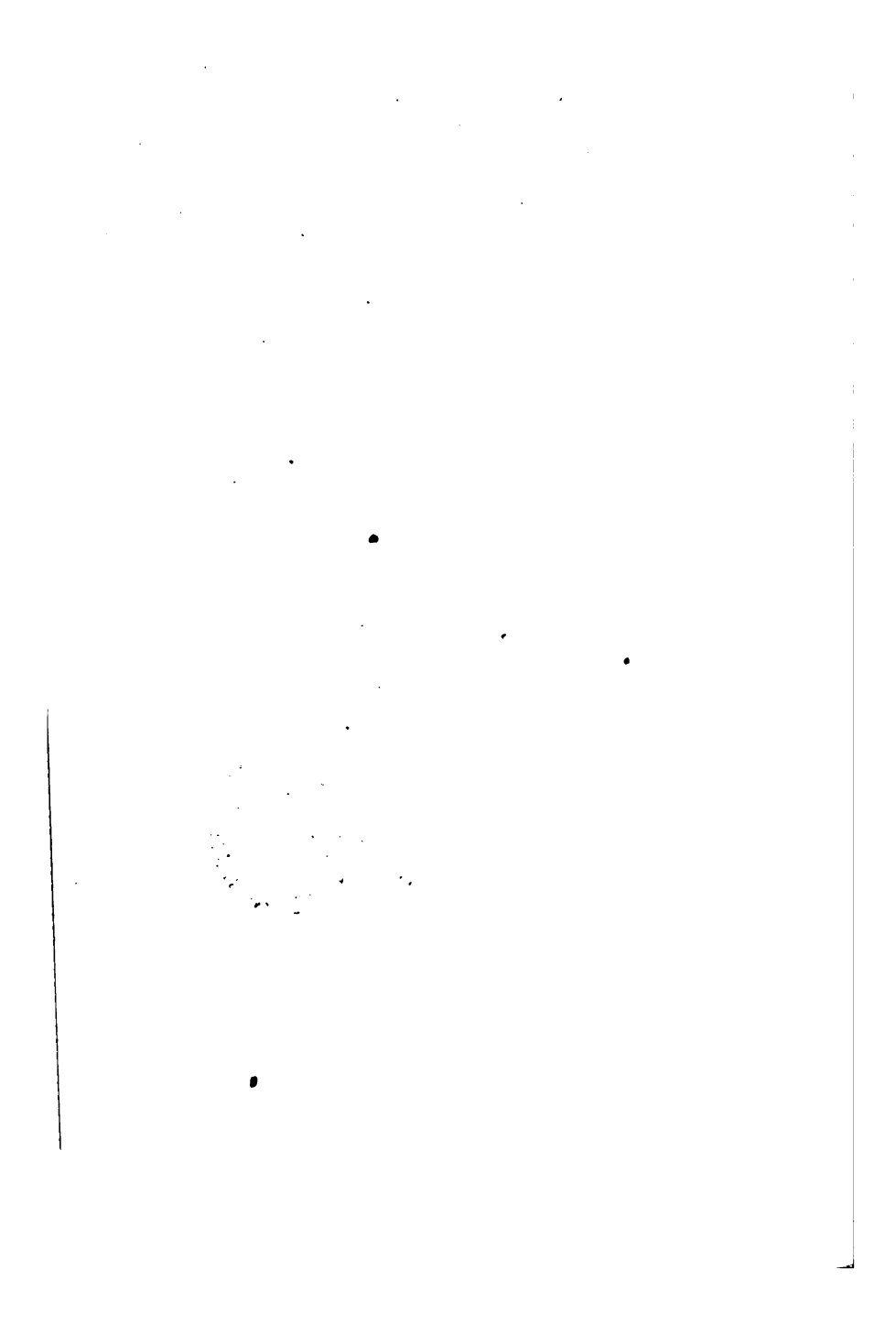
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THE STILWINCHES

OF

COMBE MAVIS.

A NOVEL.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF "THE GARSTANGS," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

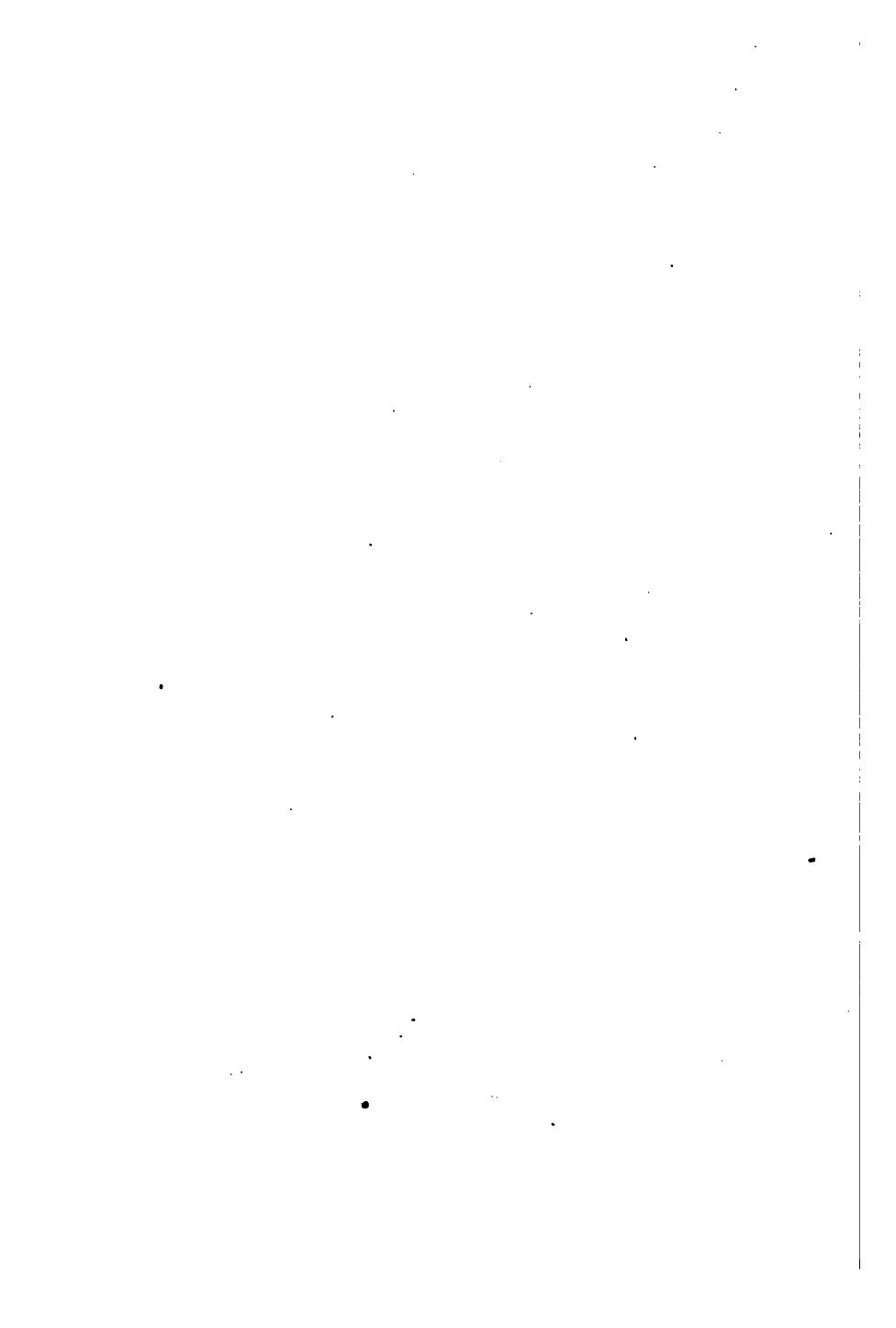
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THE
STILWINCHES OF COMBE MAVIS.

CHAPTER I.

WARNINGS.

THE following day all the three boys at the farm had a holiday in honour of the arrival of Mr. Benjamin Batt, and it was proposed and decided, nem. con., that the new arrival should be taken by his young friends up to the hall, and introduced to *their* friends, the family of his host's landlord. The two Cornlands and Ben, the younger, were anxious, if it were possible, to avoid the necessity of having Ikey as a member of the party. But when Ben-

jamin the elder was very openly consulted respecting this purpose, with the full expectation that he would be as eager as any one for the accomplishment of it, he expressed his opinion that "it would not do" to exclude his nephew. Perhaps he was sensible of some feeling of remorse for the rather violent mode in which he had resented Ikey's suggestions on the previous evening. Possibly he was merely actuated by a feeling that it was better, for various reasons, that there should not be any secret quarrel between him and his relatives. It may have been that he wished to have an opportunity of verifying the degree of truth there was in certain boastings, as to his intimacy at the hall, which Ikey, after his own peculiar fashion, had thrown out.

However this may have been, he told the lads, when they spoke to him of the desirability of so managing matters as to go to the hall unaccompanied by his nephew, that for his part he should have no objection to his company, and thought that he had better go with them. But when the scheme was mentioned to Ikey, at breakfast, and he was asked, with

as good grace as the boys could muster, if he would like to be of the party, he took them rather aback by saying that perhaps they might as well go together, as he happened to have an engagement there.

The statement was not altogether of so imaginative a kind as those of a similar nature in Ikey's mouth often were ; for it was true that when he and Miss Pernel parted on the previous day, she had said, that she hoped they would soon see him at the hall again. So they all walked across the park, up to the hall together.

So far the boys were able to achieve their object of giving the cold shoulder to Mr. Isaac Batt, that they contrived that he and his uncle should walk together, while they led the way at a little distance.

"What sort of folks are these Stilwinches?" said Mr. Benjamin to his nephew, as they passed side by side through the gate that led into the park.

"Very respectable people—old family; possessed their land for heaven knows how many generations, and all that sort of thing, you know. Mr. Stilwinche is a county magistrate;

and nobody, so far as I have heard, has a word to say against him ; though I fancy his creditors have to call at the hall for their bills more than once, or twice either, sometimes. Nevertheless, he is respected in the neighbourhood, in a sort of way : not one of those men, I should think, to whom merry Christmas is the merriest time of the year—you understand. Poor old boy ! I suppose he has as much notion of making two shillings into three, as that post has ! And talking of that, uncle, I wanted to find an opportunity of saying a word to you in your ear about my cousin Ben. I am not sure that the Combe—that's what they call the place—is quite the best house in the world for my cousin to get intimate at. And yet, situated as he is here with the Cornlands, with the way they go on, it can hardly be otherwise than that he should be intimate there. If I was in your place, I should think twice, I know, before I was content to let things go on as they are going."

Uncle Ben listened to all this with marked attention, and remained silent, for a minute or so, after his nephew had ceased speaking.

Ikey looked sideways out of the tail of his eye at his uncle's face, without being able to obtain from his examination the slightest hint as to how his warning was received.

"What is it that's amiss with 'em, then? Ben is mostly pretty well able to keep a bright look for himself in such matters," said the elder gentleman, shortly, looking up into his nephew's face as he spoke, for Ikey was considerably the taller man of the two.

"Well, there's nothing amiss with them so far as I know, more than what I have said. But there is this: Mr. Stilwinche has eight daughters a very serious consideration for a man who finds it as much as he can do to make both ends meet!" added Ikey, after a pause intended to allow time for his announcement to produce its full effect on his uncle's mind.

"Ah, a serious consideration for any man, I should say, who has *got* 'em; but what has that got to do with me or my son?" said Ben the elder, with perfect simplicity and good faith.

"Well, uncle, I can't say it seems to me so hard to understand. Boys are boys, and girls

are girls. And where there are girls, boys will be boys!" returned Ikey oracularly, and emphasizing his meaning with a whole volley of winks.

"Ah, you mean in the way of falling in love with one another," said Ben.

"To be sure I do. Why of course that's what I mean. I don't suppose that you would like your son to be marrying one of eight girls without a penny. And there are some of them very pretty girls, I can tell you. And sometimes inexperienced lads of my cousin Ben's age are apt to think more of that, than of what they should be thinking of, when it's a question of marrying;" said Ikey, with an air of much wisdom.

"I should think they were, too. So they are pretty girls, up at the Hall there, are they?" said Ben, without any manifestation of alarm at his son's danger.

"I don't say all the eight are. But several of them are real pretty girls, and no mistake. And to tell you the truth, I did not say what I said just now without reason for it. There's one of the young ladies that master Ben thinks a very particularly pretty girl, if I

ain't much mistaken. And then, you know, a young fellow is apt to be caught before he knows where he is. He gets entangled; and then he has to back out; and then you may thank your stars if you get off without an action for breach of promise. You would not like that, you know!" said Ikey, nudging his uncle's ribs with his elbow.

"No, I should not like that," said Ben.

"Nor yet to have your boy engaged to a girl without a shilling. That would be worse, wouldn't it? Well, if you have no mind for either of those pleasant alternatives, if you'll take my advice, you will just take master Ben away, while there is time and no harm done," pursued Ikey.

"Which of the young ladies is it, that you think Ben is sweet upon, nevvvy? If you tell me that, perhaps I shall be able to see what he is up to for myself!" said Ben the elder, with a wink that was meant to be very sly.

"Well, I don't think you'll have much difficulty in seeing which of 'em it is—not if he goes on with her the same way as he did the other evening when we drank tea there. Miss Beatrice, her name is. She is the fourth

of the lot. And to do my cousin justice, he has shown his sense so far, that she is one of them who has a little bit of property of her own; something very small—two hundred a year, or something like that. There are two of them that have a little bit of property left them by aunts,” said Ikey.

“You seem to know all about it, nevvvy, anyway,” remarked his uncle.

“Oh, I generally find out how the land lies. Leave me alone for that. And it was time I did, when I saw my cousin a going on the way he was going that evening, I can tell you,” said Ikey, fawningly confidential.

“That was very kind and cousinly of you, nevvvy,” returned his uncle.

“Well, of course I felt an interest, you know, that was but natural,” said Ikey.

“And is Miss Beatrice one of the pretty ones?” asked Ben, quietly.

“Yes, indeed she is. I must do master Ben the justice to admit that. You’ll know her directly. She is one with a quantity of dark curls, and bright dark eyes, and a laughing sort of a face, with plenty of colour in it. Besides, unless Ben is up to gammoning

you, you'll see in a minute which of them he is after!" said Ikey, with a half sneer.

"I don't think he is up to gammoning me," remarked the father.

"Most sons *are* up to gammoning their fathers, one way or other. Any way, Ben must know very well that you would not choose him to be getting entangled with one of eight girls unprovided for, even if she has a little bit of money of her own. But just you keep your weather eye open, uncle, and I think you'll give me credit for being up to a thing or two," said Ikey.

The party from the farm found most of the family at the hall on the lawn, engaged in showing their flower-beds, and chattering and doing civilities to two old ladies, who had evidently been brought there by a handsome carriage and pair, which was standing on the drive before the front portico, waiting to take them away again.

"How very extraordinary!" cried Miss Penelope, as the five gentlemen from Coppelford came upon the lawn; "the very *people* we *wanted* to see! at least *some* of them! that is, of *course*, we are delighted to

see *all*; but I mean that Lady Cartershaw was *particularly* desirous of seeing the Mr. Cornlands. Lady Cartershaw—Mr. Charles Cornland—Mr. Peter Cornland.”

“I am very glad to see the nephews of my old friend, Mr. John Cornland,” said the brisk old lady. “When I heard my sister here, Mrs. Nisbett, whom I am visiting, say one day, by chance, that her neighbour, Mr. Stilwinche, had let his farms to Mr. Cornland; and found, on enquiry, that he was the brother of my old friend in the colony, when my poor dear husband was governor, I was determined not to leave the country without attempting to see your father and his family. Your uncle and I used to be great friends. I hope your father is well, young gentlemen. When had you any news of your uncle?”

Charles and Peter looked at each other and hesitated, till Mr. Batt, senior, came to their relief.

“Your servant, Lady Cartershaw! I am the bringer of the latest news here from Australia; and I am sorry to say that it is sad news, as far as my poor friend Cornland is

concerned. He died a few days only before I left the colony."

"You don't say so. I am truly sorry to hear it. Dear, dear. The young go, and the old stay behind. At least he was young compared to me. If you have been any time in the colony, sir, you must have heard of my name before now," said Lady Cartershaw to Mr. Batt.

"Oh, dear, yes, my lady. I remember Sir James Cartershaw when he was governor very well. And he must have heard of my name—Benjamin Batt, at your ladyship's service," said Ben.

"Dear me, dear me. To be sure. And you are Mr. Batt. I often used to hear my poor friend Cornland speak of Ben Batt. And there was one, Mr. Batt a person to whom I was that is to say in whom I was greatly interested and indeed, to whom I was greatly attached——"

"I know, Lady Cartershaw. You are speaking of my dear, dear wife, the mother of that boy. I was aware that you had known her," said Ben, dropping his eyes to the ground.

"Yes, indeed; and I should so like to hear Dear, dear! To think that we should meet among the south-downs of Sussex. My dear," the old lady went on, turning to her sister, "you are not in a great hurry, are you? Do give me a few minutes. I should like to have a little talk with Mr. Batt."

And with that taking Ben's arm, Lady Cartershaw turned from the group standing in the centre of the lawn, and led him into that shrubbery walk from which Mrs. Frampton and Maggie emerged so suddenly upon Pernel and Ikey Batt, on the day of that gentleman's arrival.

"Your father seems to have quite fallen *en pays de connaissance*," said Barbara, who appeared disposed to be unusually gracious this morning to Ben the younger. But amid her graciousness she made use of a French phrase not only to show her own acquaintance with the language, but in the hope of embarrassing Ben by the manifestation of his ignorance of it.

Ben, however, having had as good an education as the resources of the colony could give him, knew, as it happened, a good deal

more about French than Miss Barbara did, and answered simply—

“Yes, indeed, it seems so. Who would have thought of falling in with our old governor’s wife again !”

“Is Lady Cartershaw a friend of your’s too ?” returned Miss Barbara, with an almost imperceptible toss of her head.

“No, I never saw her before. It’s too many years since Sir James Cartershaw was governor for me to remember much about him.”

But I suppose you know the present governor ?” rejoined Miss Barbara.

“Oh, yes, I have often been at the Government house with Mr. Cornland. I know the present governor much better than my father does ; for he has been absent up the country so much of late.”

Barbara began to think that it might be worth her while to pay somewhat more attention to this young savage, as she had hitherto affected to think him. For she was one of those persons, who think that social contact with rulers, powers, principalities of any sort, necessarily implies a certain degree of social

eligibility in those who have had the advantage of it. So she condescended to continue her conversation with him, while Charles Cornland was making the most of the opportunity with Millicent, and Miss Pernel was again patronizing Peter.

It would have been difficult to say whether this latter conversation was pleasing to Ikey Batt or not, as far as might have been judged from the expression of his countenance. He was himself engaged in talking to Miss Penelope, or rather in listening to her talk; or rather, again, in doing the best he could to appear to be listening to it. For by far the greater part of his attention was given to watching, in as unobservable a manner as he could, what was passing between Pernel and Peter Cornland. They were at too great a distance from him for it to be possible for him to hear what was said by either of them. But, as it seemed, there was matter enough to interest him in observing their manner to each other and the expression of their features. There came over his face as he watched them a sardonic smile, which although it appeared to betoken satisfaction rather than otherwise

with the fact, that they were thus improving their acquaintanceship with each other, yet most certainly implied no benevolent feeling for either of them.

Mr. Stilwinche was absent at quarter sessions when Mrs. Nisbett and her sister had arrived at the hall; and Mrs. Stilwinche after receiving her guests, had, as usual, seized the earliest opportunity of escaping to the repose of her own sanctum, leaving the duty of entertaining them to her daughters and Mrs. Frampton. And the latter lady, together with Beatrice, were with Mrs. Nisbett in the drawing-room, to which they had gone when Lady Cartershaw's appeal to her sister to be allowed time to have some conversation with Mr. Batt, shewed that their visit would be prolonged somewhat longer than had been anticipated. Thus when Lady Cartershaw and Ben Batt emerged on to the lawn from the shrubbery walk into which they had passed together, Ben saw his son engaged in conversation not with Beatrice, but with Barbara.

"There he is, talking to that young lady, one of the daughters of Mr. Stilwinche, I presume," said Ben, pointing his son out to Lady

Cartershaw as they came forward to that part of the lawn where the others of the party were.

"Yes, that is the second Miss Stilwinche. He knows how to pick out the prettiest of the flock. Dear, dear, to think that I should see Lucy Chester's son flirting with a girl older than his mother was when I remember her. How the time flies! I wonder whether he has any likeness to his mother," said Lady Cartershaw as she came near, leaning on Ben's arm.

"Something, I think at times. Not much. He is more like her in disposition, thank God for it. He is a very good boy is Ben, Lady Cartershaw, and clever, though it is not for me to say it. He is a little rough and self-willed may be;—more than he would have been probably if his poor dear mother had lived."

"I should not say that Miss Barbara Stilwinche was finding him rough, just at present, to judge by the look of him. You might as well keep your eyes open, Mr. Batt," added her ladyship, sinking her voice to a whisper; "they are a very respectable and

worthy family, the Stilwinches; but eight girls, and the estate is but a small one. A wink's as good as a nod, you know, as the saying is. Now you must introduce the young gentleman to me in due form."

They reached the spot where young Ben and Barbara were standing together, as she spoke, and Mr. Batt presented his son to Lady Cartershaw.

"I knew your mother, young gentleman,—knew her and loved her well," said Lady Cartershaw, giving him her hand; "and I am very glad to have an opportunity of making acquaintance with her son. Miss Barbara, I think I ran away with Mr. Batt before he had a chance of being introduced to you. I must make amends by doing it myself."

"Mr. Batt's son has made himself such a favourite with us all, that I think we all feel as if Mr. Batt himself must be an old acquaintance," said Miss Barbara with one of her most gracious and captivating smiles, as she put out her daintily gloved hand to Mr. Batt.

Ben the younger, who was not making his first acquaintance with Miss Barbara, could

not tell what to make of it. She was so unlike her usual self. And he had not the most rudimentary conception of any of the ideas which went to the making up of an understanding of the fact that people, who were not deemed worth civility before, might be found to be very much so, when it was discovered that a Governor's widow claimed them as old acquaintances.

"I do so much want to hear all about life in the colonies, Mr. Batt—there is nothing interests me so much. And I shall make you tell me all your experiences—if you do not find me too troublesome," said Miss Barbara, shooting a killing glance from under her blonde ringlets at Mr. Batt's bronzed face.

"I am afraid you would be likely to be tired first at this work, Miss," returned Batt, with the best gallantry he could muster.

"Oh, no, indeed! You will find that that will not be so," rejoined the young lady with very pretty enthusiasm.

Just then Pen came up to do her duty of receiving the stranger as *locum tenens* for her mother, while Ikey strolled off to join Miss Pernel and Peter Cornland.

"Penelope, Mr. Batt," said Barbara.

Penelope executed a very elaborate curtsy, and Mr. Batt felt called upon to perform a bow to match.

"I am *so* sorry, Mr. Batt, that mamma is not *here* to receive you. She was *feeling* fatigued, and has *retired* to her room," said Pen, with her usual strange selection of words to emphasize.

"I have to thank you, Miss Stilwinche, and all your family, for a great deal of kindness shown to my boy, I find," said Ben.

"Oh, we were *delighted*, I am sure! and *such* a croquet player! quite the victorious hero comes!" said Pen, led away by her quotation into rather an irrelevant phrase.

"My dear, will you kindly let my sister know that I won't keep her any longer. I am ashamed of having made such a visitation," said Lady Cartershaw to Barbara, who went into the drawing-room through the open window to do as she was asked.


Mrs. Nisbett, and Mrs. Frampton, and Beatrice all came out together, and Lady Cartershaw, saying a hearty good-bye to Pen and Mr. Batt, joined them at the window,

and turned, accompanied by all of them, towards the front of the house, where the carriage was waiting.

So that Pen and Mr. Batt were left talking together, young Ben having run off as soon as ever he saw Beatrice come out from the window, to join her.

CHAPTER II.

ONE OF THE RIGHT SORT.

R. BENJAMIN BATT had walked all the way with his nephew Ikey in coming from Copleford to Combe Hall, but on setting out to return thither at the conclusion of their visit, and after having accepted an invitation to drink tea on the lawn at the Hall on the following evening, he found the means of making it clear that he did not intend that the walk home should be performed in the same order. Perhaps he thought that he had accomplished his share of the disagreeable work. Possibly he had learned from his nephew all that he had wished to learn from him respecting the family at the Combe, or maybe it was simply

that he wanted an opportunity of saying a few words to his son on the subject of what he had seen and heard during their visit.

Be that as it may, the fact was that he so contrived that while Ikey and the two Cornwall boys walked on together, he and his son followed them at such a distance that the two parties were out of earshot of each other. Perhaps Ikey fell, not unwillingly, into this arrangement, for he had evidently felt considerable interest in the progress of the acquaintanceship between Miss Pernel and Peter Cornland, and lost no time in attacking the latter upon the subject as soon as he left the Hall on their return to the farm.

"Well, I declare, Peter, that you are quite a terrible fellow with the girls! I wanted to have said a few words to Miss Pernel Stilwinche, but there was no getting near her for you—you stuck to her like wax. Not that I blame you for it, she is the best of the lot, to my thinking."

"I stick to her like wax!" said Peter, blushing up to the ears; "I declare I did nothing of the sort. It wasn't my fault . . ."

"You mean to say that *she* stuck to *you*

like wax, eh? Well, certainly the other evening at tea it looked as if she meant something like it, there's no denying that," said Ikey, in a tone evidently meant to be rather complimentary than the reverse.

"She meant to be civil, I suppose, that's all. Why, how could she do otherwise? All the rest were talking to the ones that sat next 'em," replied Peter, feeling by no means flattered by Ikey's bantering.

"But all the others didn't make room special by their sides for the gentlemen they chose to have near 'em, did they? No, no; let Miss Pernel alone for knowing what she is after. Where there's eight young ladies in a family, why, they must be looking out for themselves, that's natural,—each one for herself, of course. And where there's known to be ten thousand pounds in a family, settled money, you know—eh?"

"That's a good one, any way!" cried Peter, quite triumphantly; "if they know so much as that, they know that mother's fortune is settled on Charles! Making up to me, indeed!"

"Money settled like that is mostly settled .

on the eldest," said Ikey, with his eyes on the ground, and letting his words fall slowly and distinctly; "and I say again," he added, "let Miss Pernel alone for knowing what she is after."

"Of course it's settled on the eldest—everybody knows that. And if these girls at the Hall know anything about the ten thousand pounds, which I don't think at all likely, they must know that it is Charles here that they ought to set their caps at, and not me," returned Peter, with triumphant logic.

"Humph! that's as it may be! Miss Pernel knows what she knows, and I know what I know," said Ikey, with a special emphasis on the last words; "and I don't mind telling you, both of you, this much, that I wouldn't have you be making too sure which of you two is the best worth looking after by a young lady that wants a husband with ten thousand pounds, that's all."

"I say, Peter, by Jove I must look out for myself! If Miss Pernel is so desperately smitten by you, and by poor mother's ten thousand pounds at the same time, she has nothing to do but to put a little ratsbane in

my tea one of these evenings," said Charles, with a cheery laugh.

"Of course—nothing simpler. But I don't think it is right to talk of a young lady in such a way," said Peter, feeling somewhat of gratitude for Miss Pernel's kindness to him.

"Oh, come, now, Peter, my boy, she did make up to you pretty strong the other evening, and again to-day, there's no denying that, let her motives be what they may," returned Charles.

"Why, Charles, anybody might see with half an eye that it was because I had nobody else to speak to—it was simple good nature—and doing the civil to visitors," said Peter, warmly.

"I daresay ; but if you will take my advice, Peter, in case I should hop the twig one of these days in a way that looks fishy—you understand—I would have nothing to say to Miss Pernel, if I was you," said Charles, with mock gravity.

"Don't talk such nonsense, Charles ; I don't half like it," said Peter, more seriously than either of them had yet spoken.

"Pshaw! don't be so grave about it, old chap. One is not bound always to talk sense, I hope," laughed Charles.

"So far as I know, *I* have not been talking any nonsense," said Ikey. "What I said, I mean. I take it Miss Pernel knows a thing or two. Anyway, I am sure I do. And perhaps it might be, that a lady might find Mr. Peter Cornland well worth looking after, and no need of ratsbane in the matter, neither. What a long way behind we have left my uncle and cousin."

The two Ben Batts, father and son, had walked slowly, for they had been interested in the conversation that had passed between them.

It had turned first on Lady Cartershaw, and the strangeness of meeting the late governor's widow, who had known so much of them and about them in old times, so far away from the scenes of their former intercourse. And Mr. Batt had been telling his son all about the friendship there had been between Lady Cartershaw and the Lucy Chester who had become his wife. And this had led him to speak more to Ben of the

mother he had never known, than he was in the habit of doing. And Ben had listened to him with the greatest interest.

"My poor Lucy was very fond of her," continued the elder man, "and she always was, and is still, a very good and friendly sort of body. Think of her whispering a word in my ear just now, to warn me against the danger of your falling in love with one of those young ladies at the hall there, because she fancied I should wish you to marry some girl with a pot of money. She meant it friendly."

"I dare say she did. But looking at all the many ways there are of getting money in the world, father, don't you think that marrying a girl because she has got a lot of it, is one of the worst?" said Ben.

"Anyway, I did not take that way myself, though I was keen enough after money; and I had no father to get it for me—leastways he did not give any to me. But I'll tell you what, Ben; there's a worse thing than marrying a girl because she has got money, and that is being accepted by a girl because *you* have got money," said his father, gravely.

"That's true, no doubt," replied his son, thoughtfully. "But every body must know that *I* have no money, except what you give me; and they can't know whether you have got much or little. And they can't expect that you should give me money to live in idleness. And if you have got enough for yourself, and to give me a good education, I know that there's more to be had where your's came from. I can do what you have done."

"Humph! I'm not quite so sure about that, perhaps. But in one way it's true, that you ought to be able to do better than I ever did; for you have had a better education than I ever had, by a long chalk. Do you suppose, now, that these young ladies at the hall look upon you as a young man that has got to earn his own bread in the world, and his wife's too?" said his father, stopping in his walk, and facing him.

"Really I don't know, father. But I am quite sure of this, that I never said any word to any of them to lead them to think the contrary," said Ben.

"But there was a little bird, who told me

something of your being sweet on one of the young ladies, or of one of the young ladies being sweet on you, which ever it might be. Is there any truth in that, eh, Ben?" said his father, with a smile in his eye.

"You tell first who was the little bird," said Ben, answering his father's smile with a bright one of his own. "There never was any thing, and there ain't any thing now, father, that I want to hide from you. But I don't like 'little birds' to be coming between us."

"Well, the little bird was neither of your cronies, the young Cornlands. It wasn't a very sweet-voiced little bird, and not such a very little one—more like a raven, perhaps," said Ben the elder, with a wink.

"Oh, I know. It was that charming cousin of mine. I should not wonder if it was to come to pass, that some day or other I should find it necessary to punch my cousin's head for him. He is fond of saying that blood is thicker than water. I don't much think that his is; and I have three parts of a mind to try," said Ben, colouring with anger.

"It's very wrong and ungenteel to punch

people's heads," replied his father, while his eyes danced in his head with chuckling inward laughter. "There's many a thing your father has done before you, which you should not think of doing, seeing you have had such a deal more of education. If *you* was to go and punch cousin Ikey's head, he might think we were a quarrelsome family."

"Why . . . you don't mean to say . . ." began Ben, doubtfully half guessing that his father really did mean to insinuate that he had already found an opportunity of doing, what Ben junior would have so much liked to do.

"Oh, no ; not at all ! *I* don't mean to say anything," returned his father, still apparently bursting with suppressed laughter. "But look here," he added, a little more gravely, "this is what he did say : he gave me the same caution that her ladyship gave me. And I'm sure she meant it friendly. He thought I had better look out that you was not snapped up, and made a mouthful of by one of those girls there. And he said that he thought you was in considerable danger—in short, that you had been coming it *rayther*

strong in the way of flirting with one of them. No ; flirting *is* dangerous, when one has not made up one's mind to make more of it than flirting," said his father more seriously.

"But I *have* made up my mind," said Ben, stoutly.

"Oh, you have, have you?" returned his father.

"And I meant to have introduced you to her, and then told you all about it I wanted you to see her first but I could not manage it ! It all went wrong at the hall to-day," said Ben.

"How wrong ? I saw you talking to her when I came out of the shubbery with Lady Cartershaw. Why didn't you introduce me to her then ? I did have a look at her, thinking of what Ikey had told me. He said she was very pretty, and so she is. No mistake about that. But I thought he said that she had dark hair. The girl you were with was light coloured. No, there's no denying she's pretty," said his father.

"The girl you saw me talking to ! *That* was not the one. That was Miss Barbara ! Marry her ? No, thank you, not if I know it.

Why, I wouldn't marry Barbara Stilwinche, if there was not another girl in all Europe," said Ben, with intense earnestness.

"Well, to tell the honest truth, I did not like the cut of her jib. I don't think she is the right sort," said his father.

"The right sort? No. Just you wait, father, till you see Beatrice. You'll see whether she is the right sort. She's as much like her sister as a Yankey skipper is to a Chinaman."

"I'm glad of that," said Ben senior.

"If you don't like my Beatrice when you see her, you say I am a fool, who don't know one of the best sort when I see her. I'll go bail you like her, father," said his son.

"I hope I shall . . . as you say you have made up your mind! Pray, has the young lady made up her mind, too?" said his father.

"Well, I am afraid I have no right to say that she has. But I don't think she was displeased at my asking her," said Ben.

"Oh, you have asked her, have you? Well, you have not let the grass grow under your feet, upon my word! And what answer did you get?" returned his father.

“Well, no answer—not to say a real answer. I do think she likes me, and that’s the honest truth. But I take it, she wants to know a little more about us, you know wants to know, I suppose, what you will say to it,” replied Ben, colouring a little.

“What an unreasonable young lady! What can it signify what I think or say about it, you know!” said Mr. Batt, with a sidelong glance at his son.

“You are not displeased, father, at my thinking of choosing a wife for myself, according to my own notions?” said Ben, in a different tone from that in which both of them had been hitherto speaking.

“No, my boy! Not I! I would have you choose for yourself. I never asked my father anything about it when I married your mother. And if I had taken counsel with all the wise people in the world, I could not have done better than I did, God knows! Not that I and my father were altogether the same thing as you and your father. What did you tell the young lady about your means of maintaining her?” said his father, who had spoken the first part of the words he had uttered with

cordial sincerity, but had fallen back, at the last sentence, into a half-bantering tone.

"I told her that I had little doubt but that I could make money where you had made it—and that I thought you would help me . . . and then she has something of her own;" with a steady, cheerful confidence in his own power to make his way in the world, which the citizen of a new country is apt to feel, and, alas, to be justified in feeling to a much greater extent than the youth of our own crowded land.

"And your notion is, then," rejoined his father, "that this young lady, brought up in her father's house, among the Sussex downs here, would be ready to throw in her lot, and her bit of fortune, with you, to go out to the colony to make your way, as I made mine? If so, she is one of the right sort, and no mistake!"

"Yes, that's my notion; and I believe she is one of that sort! She has not said yes, yet. And, mind you, father, I won't say but what I think most likely she would say no, if you were to set your face against it. But if you can look well on it, and lend us some-

thing of a helping hand, I have good hope. And now you know all my mind, and all my heart upon the subject. But you wait till you have seen her!" said Ben.

"I will wait till I have seen her," replied his father.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT IS IKEY UP TO ?



AFTER the above conversation, Ben and his father walked on for a little while side by side, in silence, which was at last broken by the elder.

“There was another matter that I wanted to ask you about, Ben—and that’s all about making love and marrying—which I suppose is the main talk in a house where there are eight unmarried daughters—but it don’t interest either you or me so closely as what we were talking of just now. But one or two things that Lady Cartershaw said, set me a thinking, and I almost think . . . it would be funny enough if my guess is right . . . but let’s hear what you can tell me about it.

When my lady and I went into that shady walk in the shrubbery, we met a young lady just coming out of it. She had been walking there all by herself, while the others were laughing and talking out on the lawn in the sunshine; and I never saw a more miserable looking face in my life. She was as pale as a ghost, and it was plain to see that she had been crying. And she hung her head down as we passed, and just said some word to Lady Cartershaw. She turned to look after her, as she went out of the walk, and I could not help looking at my lady, as much as to say, what's amiss here? 'Ah, poor thing!' says she; 'my sister, who is very intimate with Mrs. Frampton—that's these girl's aunt—has been telling me all about her, poor girl! Really, I shouldn't wonder,' says my lady, 'if between them all they were to be the death of her.' And then she told me that it was no secret at all, for all the neighbours knew all about it,—how that a young gentleman, living somewhere close by here with a tutor, had fallen in love with her, and she with him, and how they had engaged themselves to each other, and how it all had to be broken off,

because the young man's mother wouldn't hear of it. And then she said one or two things about this lady, the young man's mother, that set me a thinking. . . . But now let's hear what you know about it? Being so much at the house, you must have seen the youngster."

"Oh, yes; I've seen all about it! I know the chap very well; Augustus Fitzwilliam his name is, and he is a good sort of fellow enough, as far as I can see," replied Ben.

"And he made up to this girl, while you was making love to Miss Beatrice! A nice house full of it you must have had among you!" said his father.

"And that was not all!" returned Ben, smiling; "there was Charley Cornland and Miss Millicent—that's the youngest of the family—they were desperate! . . . only I don't think that Charley quite knew his own mind, as well as I knew mine."

"Upon my word, you seem to have fallen into the thick of it! And Charley hadn't quite made up his mind, you say?"

"Well, he seemed to have half—or more than half—a fancy for that Miss Barbara,

that you didn't like the cut of. But, mind you, father, this is all between you and me ; because I don't know that there has ever been anything said, you know, between Charley and Miss Milly ; and I have no business to say anything . . . more than what I have seen for myself, with my own eyes," said Ben.

"All right, I understand. And, Peter, which of them has fallen in love with him, or which has he fallen in love with?" asked Mr. Batt.

"Oh, Peter! Well, poor Peter! I don't know that he has done anything in that line as yet," replied Ben, with a sort of surprise—at least his manner seemed to indicate as much—that any such question should be asked.

"And why not Peter, as well as you others, I wonder?" said Mr. Batt.

"I don't know, I am sure. Poor Peter! It certainly is not that he is not as good a fellow as ever lived. I've a great affection for Peter. I don't know but what, if Charley and Peter were both drowning, and I could save only one, I should think of Peter first," said Ben musingly ; "but then perhaps," he

added, "that might be because one feels more that Charley is able to take care of himself."

"And Peter is more of a milksop, eh?" rejoined his father.

"No, not a bit of it. Peter is not the least bit of a milksop in any way! No, that's not it. But . . . what I mean is, he is not one who thinks for himself. If he and Charley were both in the water drowning together, what he would think most of would be helping Charley," said Ben.

"Oh, that's the way of it is it? Then our friend Peter is one of that sort other people should think the more of," said Mr. Batt.

"Just so," said his son.

"But now tell me about this other chap—what did you say his name is?" returned Mr. Batt.

"What other chap?" said Ben.

"Why the young fellow with a tutor, whose mother won't let him marry the young lady I saw in the shrubbery?"

"Oh! Augustus Fitzwilliam! Well, I don't know that there's much to tell about him. He seems a good fellow enough. He lives in the house of a clergyman, who is his

tutor, about three miles from this. He has not been there long—but long enough to fall in love with Miss Margaret.”

“Miss Margaret! I should never learn the names of such a lot of them. Which is she, eldest, youngest, or what?”

“She is the youngest but one. The youngest is Millicent, the one, or one of the ones, Charley is sweet upon.”

“And has she got any money of her own?”

“Not a penny, I should think. There are only two out of the lot who have anything of their own, Miss Barbara and Beatrice.”

“Then this Fitzwilliam did not make up to Miss Margaret for her money?”

“Oh, bless your soul, no! I fancy he is as rich as a Jew; or at least his mother. I believe he has no father. And that’s where the trouble is. He would stick to his engagement like a brick. But his mother says, ‘you may stand to your engagement if you like, and the young lady may hold to her’s if she and her family like; only if she marries you, she marries a beggar, that’s all; for not one penny of my money shall you ever see, if you are the husband of Margaret Stilwinche.’ That’s

how the matter stands; and that's what makes her look the way you saw her look, poor girl."

"And would he stand to his word to the girl in spite of what his mother says?" asked Mr. Batt, with some doubt in his voice.

"So I understand," replied Ben.

"He must be a fellow with some stuff in him then?" returned his father.

"I think he is a very good fellow. All the more, perhaps, under the circumstances, because it would be hard to say how he could earn a crust for himself, let alone a wife, unless it was breaking stones on the road."

"Why shouldn't he earn his bread as well as another?"

"Well, because in the first place he has never been brought up to do it, you see. He has always lived, like those who are born with a silver spoon in their mouths. And then, though, as I say, he seems to be a very good fellow, with his heart in the right place and all that, I don't think he has the value of a sixpenny piece of brains in his head. He is not the right sort to earn his salt."

"And what sort is the girl?" pursued Mr. Batt.

"Much the same, I should say. I think she is a good sort of girl enough; and I don't believe a bit that she set her cap at young Fitzwilliam because of his mother's money. But she is a bit of a fool to tell the truth,—much such another as he is. I should think that they were just suited to each other."

"And now she is breaking her heart, because she is disappointed in her love. Poor little thing. And very pretty she is too, for all her tears and miserable looks," said the elder gentleman.

"Yes, she is pretty. Poor little Maggie. I am very sorry for her. But there does not seem to be any help for it—of course her friends will not hear of her marrying a man, who has not the means of keeping her, and does not seem likely ever to have."

"Why, what a tiger the young fellow's mother must be! Do you know at all anything about her?"

"Nothing at all, I never saw her. Most of them at the hall have never seen her. But I had a talk one day with Mrs. Gilling—that's the wife of the farmer where she lodges—and by Mrs. Gilling's account she must be a

disagreeable customer; she and her maid Smithers. Mrs. Gilling says that the maid is worse than the mistress, and turns the house up side down. Mrs. Gilling is a good woman enough, but I think she'd be the death of Smithers if she could."

"What brought Mrs. Fitzwilliam to lodge at the farmer's house, if she is so rich?" asked Mr. Batt.

"She came down here from London all about this affair of Augustus'. His tutor thought it is duty to write and tell her what her son was up to. And down she came post haste, and settles the matter at once by saying that if he marries the girl, she will never give him a farthing. I think it is a hard case," concluded Ben.

"And what's her objection to the girl?" asked Mr. Batt again.

"Gus says that she has no objection at all except that she has no title. He says that his mother would not mind about her having no money, if she was a lady of high rank. She wants him to marry somebody that is called My Lady," said Ben sarcastically.

"Damn'd old fool! So that her plan is to

find some lord's daughter poor enough to make it worth her while to sell herself for old I mean for her money. Nice wife she'll get for her son that way. And a pretty business the girl who sells herself will make of it. And a pretty kettle of fish it will be altogether."

"One can hardly think that the old lady would hold to it, when she sees that she is destroying her son's happiness. But Gus declares that there's no hope of moving her. That nothing on earth would make her change her mind, when she has set it upon anything."

"Humph!—it would be a great bit of fun, if one could find some means to make her change her tone, would'nt it?"

And then Mr. Batt relapsed into silence and began biting his nails.

"So now," he said, after remaining thus silent till they were near the gate leading into the orchard of the farm, "I know all about how the land lies, and what you are all about. But you have not told me a word, by-the-bye, about cousin Ikey? What does he do among all the ladies?"

"Well, it is rather odd. Somehow or other Ikey seemed to make acquaintance at once, and specially with the third sister, Miss Pernel."

"What a queer name, Pernel! Never heard that name before."

"Yes, an odd name. Well, Ikey seemed to get quite confidential with her all at once. I think he met her at the parson's house before ever he went to the Hall."

"And has Miss Pernel any money of her own?"

"No, only two of them, as I told you, Miss Barbara and Beatrice."

"Then I think Cousin Ikey's attention to Miss Pernel is odd, as you say," returned Mr. Batt, drily.

"But the oddest is that since Ikey came here, and since he and Miss Pernel have been so thick together, she has taken to being particularly attentive to poor Peter, just as if Ikey put her up to it. And I have seen him watching her at it in such a queer way, that I could not tell whether he was pleased or jealous at it. Charley and I were talking of it, and we do not know what to make of it."

“Was it Miss Pernel that I saw talking to Peter on the lawn to-day?”


“Yes ; that was Miss Pernel. She is the third.”

“Humph ! what my Nevvy Ikey does has a meaning in it, that you may depend on.”

And as Mr. Batt expressed this opinion, they passed through the gate into the orchard, and entered the farm-house.

CHAPTER IV.

WHERE THE SHOE PINCHED.

T was impossible to deny that Ikey Batt had accepted the punishment which his hot-tempered uncle had seen fit to inflict upon him, to all appearances, at all events, in an exemplary and most Christian spirit. Surely never before did a man and an attorney pocket a knock-down blow so meekly, yet those who best knew him would not have imputed to Ikey too great a tendency to excess in the matter of forgiveness, or a propensity to accept too literally the precept which enjoins him who is smitten on one cheek to offer the other to the offender for a second blow ; yet he not only seemed to have forgotten all

about his uncle Ben's violence, but assumed that virtue if he had it not, so admirably, as to lead his uncle into forgetting all about it himself. It is not, perhaps, so difficult for a man who has given a blow to forget the circumstance, as it is for him who has received it to do so; but it will be admitted that it is difficult for the receiver of the injury to behave in such sort as to be the main cause of the forgetfulness of the inflicter of it.

Ikey accomplished this, as a man generally will succeed in accomplishing anything on which that depends on which he has set his heart. There was more than one reason which made it important to him to forgive Uncle Ben's violence,—of course without prejudice, as he with admirable candour expressed his meaning,—that is to say that if hereafter circumstances should seem to indicate making the most of his grievance as more expedient than Christian charity and forgiveness, then, and in that case, he should hold himself free to discard Christian charity, and turn to action for assault and battery.

It was by virtue of this admirably schooled spirit that Ikey was enabled on the following

morning after breakfast to propose to his uncle in his most amiable manner a walk in the village, and then a call at the vicarage, where he should like, he said, to have an opportunity of making his uncle acquainted with his good friend Miss Ironside, the vicar's sister. Mr. Batt, who was by no means unwilling to have a little further conversation with his nephew upon sundry subjects, readily accepted the proposition ; and when the young Cornlands and Ben went out to the fields, the uncle and nephew started in very friendly guise on their walk.

"You have hardly told me any anything yet about my brother, and how things go on in the island," began Mr. Batt, as they quitted the house.

He was pruning and shaping a stick he had cut in the hedge as he spoke, for it was one of Mr. Batt's peculiarities that it seemed always necessary to him to be doing something with his hands. There seemed to be a superfluity of nervous energy about him which needed every outlet for its expenditure that he could possibly find. He was a small man, not quite so tall as his son, with stiff black

hair, brushed up the wrong way, scrubbing-brush fashion, and he was somewhat marked by the small pox. This, it must be admitted, is not the description of an Apollo, but the outward man of Mr. Batt was not without certain redeeming features. Eyes, teeth, and expression of the mouth were all eminently good. Brighter eyes never sparkled in a human head than those which lit up the countenance of Benjamin Batt, nor were they of that sort of hard metallic superficial-looking brightness which often exists without contributing anything—but rather the contrary—to the pleasingness of a human face. They were not black eyes, but very dark brown; not large, but deep-looking and liquid; beautiful eyes, which more than one female observer of them had thought lamentably wasted on that rough and hard-looking visage. Lucy Chester had not deemed that they were at all wasted, but put to admirable use in making all the face to which they belonged full of light, and meaning, and sympathetic intelligence. They were eyes, the habitual expression of which was fun and humour; the not unfrequent expression of which was the most

eloquent tenderness; and the occasional expression of which was such, that many a bold and lawless ruffian had, in the course of their owner's experience, quailed before them. But nobody saw the brilliant row of even white teeth belonging to those eyes unless Mr. Batt was in the thoroughly good and kindly humour which was the ordinary temper of the man. And nobody who did see them doubted that such was the disposition of his spirit, for when it was otherwise with him, the firm lips were closely shut, or, if opened to speak, the short, sharp words of angry remonstrance or command, were so opened, that the teeth were not visible. It is difficult to say exactly what it is, that, apart from all the advantages or consequences of position, or constituted authority, or even of intellectual superiority, makes one man capable of and adapted for commanding and ruling his fellow-men. But whatever it is, that little pock-marked, scrubbing-brush-haired man had it; and none who had ever seen him at the work could doubt that he had it in very remarkable perfection. If, instead of having been the son of a city clerk, disinherited and flung on a

new and rough world, to make his own way in it, solely by the force and value of his own energy and moral worth, Benjamin Batt had been placed in social circumstances forming a "concentration accordingly," he would doubtless have become a great general. Nay, as far as the mere potency of the innate power to command goes, he had in his day done more than a general is called upon to do in the same sort; in just so much as it may be supposed to be more difficult to enforce obedience from lawless gold-diggers than from disciplined soldiers.

"Now tell me all about affairs in the island, and my brother, and how matters have gone with him?" said Mr. Batt, without looking up from the stick he was cutting into shape.

"Well, to tell the truth, uncle, I can't say that there's any thing much to complain of, as things are now. I have observed that those who don't mind hard work and sticking to it, generally do find their bread buttered in the long run."

"Ah, that's the ticket! Hard work and plenty of it, and not being afraid to put your hand to what there is to be done, let it be

what it will!" said Mr. Batt, cutting away at his stick, and appearing to give more attention to that than to his words.

"And then, you see, for many years father has had nobody to think of or provide for but himself. For I have managed to pick up my own worms since I was quite a lad. That tells, you know. A lone man don't need much, and don't spend much. I don't mind telling you, uncle, that for many a year there has been a pretty deal more of coming in than going out of father's pocket. Father's a warm man, uncle, though he is but a parish clerk, though I shouldn't say as much to any man breathing but you."

"I should say that a lone man was likely to be a cold, rather than a warm one," still not seeming to be thinking much of what he was saying.

"Ha! ha! ha! But when a man is warm hereabouts," said Ikey, clapping his hand on his pocket, "it's wonderful how it warms him all over . . . as I am sure I need not tell *you*, uncle, eh!"

"And my brother has always remained clerk of St. Peter's, I suppose?" said Mr.

Batt, straightening his stick with his hands, as he spoke.

"Yes, and he is likely to be, as long as he lives. What should he give it up for? It's not hard work, and it brings in a pretty bit of money, one way and another. Besides, the position is helpful now and then in other ways."

"No, I don't suppose there can be much hard work ; but I thought you were talking of hard work just now, nevvv?" said Mr. Batt, looking up.

"Ah, to be sure. You must not suppose that father has done all he has done by merely being parish clerk. No, he knows a trick worth two of that. Money, you know, uncle, breeds money ; but it is not just by sitting at home and looking at it, that it can be made to breed most."

"But to breed money, as you say, nevvv, you must have your nest-egg to begin with. And it was the parish clerk's place that gave your father that. I often think how different it would have been with both of us, if we hadn't had the friendship and help, each of us, of one of the old master's sons. It seems as if

Cornland and Batt was meant to go together, as naturally as bread and butter. And now I have lost my old master and friend."

"I can't say how you may have found it, uncle ; but I can assure you that it was very little good that ever came to either father or me from this Mr. Cornland. Neither father nor I are the sort to bear malice, or else I could tell you But best let bygones be bygones."

"I am sure I thought you had never had anything but good from Charles Cornland. Why it was he that got your father the clerkship to start with."

"Not he. No, no, that is a mistake. Father's own fitness for the place got him that, and no mistake. But it is not that. It is the way they always behaved to us in the island—not only Charles Cornland himself, but these boys of his. You never saw any thing like the insolence and airs they used to give themselves, specially Charles—treating one as if one was the very dirt of the ground under their feet. I don't want to bear malice, but that is the truth."

"Why they seem kind enough to you now

here at all events," said his uncle, looking up from his stick polishing with considerable surprise.

"Ah, yes, seem! I don't know how you may have found the world, uncle; but I have learned to know that there is a sort of seeming which one would far rather be without. I like reality, and not seeming," said Ikey.

"Well, I should say now, if I was asked, that there was a tolerably fair share of reality about the loaf and butter, and ham, and tea, and sugar, and cream, that you were walking into, as if you meant it, just now at breakfast! I found my supper and bed, too, quite real."

"Ah, uncle, you are too kind-hearted and simple-natured yourself to understand it all. You don't see it. There's such things as motives—wheels within wheels, as they say," returned Ikey, shaking his head with an air that was intended to indicate a profound insight into the baseness of human nature.

"I don't know what you are driving at. Wasn't it real kind and hospitable to ask you to stay here, when they knew that I was coming, just to see me?" said Ben, who, whatever feeling might be awakened in him by the

sentiments his nephew was expressing, seemed not unwilling to encourage him to talk, and to hear what he had to say.

“Kind and hospitable,” sneered Ikey; “what do you think of the kindness and hospitality of people who kick you when you are down—that is, I mean, when you are in poor circumstances in comparison to themselves, and keep their kindness for the time when you can buy ’em, aye, and sell ’em too, if they only knew it? I don’t think much of such kindness for my part.”

Ben could not avoid being aware, that, whatever hospitality might have been extended by Mr. Cornland to his nephew, it was nevertheless true enough and obvious enough that the young men, and Charles especially, had no kindly feeling towards him; that indeed, to use the vulgar phrase, there was no love lost between them. But then it was also clear, that his own son liked his cousin Ikey just as little as Charles Cornland did. And in this latter case, at all events, the dislike must be generated by the simple process of observing the man as he was. There could be no old grudges between Ben and his

cousin. And certainly the estimate, which Mr. Batt himself had formed of his nephew's character during the few days they had now passed under the same roof, was not a favourable one, to speak in the mildest terms. Nevertheless, he was desirous of hearing all that Ikey had to say of the two lads, and especially of the past history of the family, while they were in the Isle of Man.

"No," returned Ben, in reply to his nephew's last words, "that don't look pretty, certainly. But there is one thing that all people, that have pushed themselves up in the world, should remember ; and that is, that it is natural, and can't be helped, that folks should be treated different when they have pushed themselves up, from what they was before they had pushed themselves up. It can't be no otherwise in the natur' of things, you see. People work and push themselves up on purpose to be treated different. I should feel more inclined to be riled, for my part, if people did not treat me different from what they used to do, when I began the world. And as for buying and selling, why

what can Cornland or his boys want, that you can give 'em, or keep back from 'em?"

"Ah, that would be telling!" said Ikey, with a concentrated expression of cunning and malice in his cold and piercing grey eyes. "More, perhaps, than they think for," he added, forgetting, with curious inconsistency, that he had just been insinuating that their apparent kindness to him was motivated by interested speculations as to what might be got from him.

Ben gave but little heed to this sort of talk, deeming it to be merely the unmeaning result of hurt self-love. But having his own purposes in view, he said, applying himself again to the work of perfecting his stick,—

"You say, nevvv, that Charles Cornland—young Charles, I mean—was always so apt to be uppish and overbearing. Did you find the same thing in Peter?"

"Peter! I don't see that there's much good in Peter, either. Peter never counted for anything with anyone, you see. No, I don't say that he has the same insolent spirit in him that Charles has. But whatever Charles says, he'll swear to. He's nothing but a sort

of shadow of his brother, that's all he is. If his brother was to tell him to go and commit murder, he'd do it—or anything else either. That's all about Peter !”

“I suppose that Charles may be what folks call the stronger character of the two. But no doubt a great deal of what you have been saying, has arisen from Charles being the elder brother, especially both the boys having been brought up with the knowledge, that the property of the family, or at all events the greater part of it, was to go to the elder—that Charles was to be the well-to-do man, and Peter—as seems likely—more or less dependent on him.”

“The ten thousand pounds which came from their mother, must go to the eldest, according to the will of old Stanton ; and I suppose that Mr. Cornland will choose, that most, if not all, of what he can dispose of himself, shall go with it. He wants to make Charles a man of position and wealth.”

“But that would be hardly right, as regards Peter ?” said Ben, questioningly.

“Right ! I don't suppose that Cornland would care much whether it was right or not !

But I'd lay my life, that if you could get at Peter's own opinion on the matter, he would be all in favour of Charles having everything ; he would think that quite natural, and the right thing. I am sure he would !"

"No wonder he has grown up to be nothing but his brother's shadow," said Ben.

"Ay, that's where it is! Charles has always been made everything of, and Peter nothing. I suppose that it would about go near to break old Cornland's heart, if it was to turn out to be all t'other way—if, for instance, I mean, Charles were to die, and so leave Peter eldest son !"

"Well, naturally ! But Charles Cornland looks about as little like dying as any young fellow I know. Of course, he'll live to inherit the property."

"Perhaps he might live and not inherit the property," returned Ikey, speaking hesitatingly, and with a sidelong look at his uncle out of his villainous eyes.


"I don't know what you mean ! You were saying yourself, not a minute ago, that he must inherit it—or at least the greater part of it, by the terms of his grandfather's will."

"I said, that old Stanton had left his money so that the eldest son must inherit it," said Ikey, with another viperous glance, but speaking with the manner of one who was hesitating how far he should venture to speak out the thought that was in him.

"Very well ; and as Charles is the eldest if he lives, as he is likely to live, he must inherit the money. Sure, it's plain enough !" said Ben, who seemed to think that the matter was thus settled, and the conversation at an end.

CHAPTER V.

IKKEY LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG.

HERE was a silence of some minutes' duration, during which the uncle and nephew walked on side by side, the elder man apparently quite contentedly working away at the polishing of his stick, as he walked, and the younger one in deep thought, and uneasy doubt as to the turn he should give to the sequel of the conversation.

"Maybe, uncle," he said at last, "it is not so plain as it seems to you. Maybe, all these people—this Charles Cornland, the father, who used to be too fine a gentleman to speak to my father, as if he was not the same flesh and blood, and his sister, that always treated my

mother as if she was the dirt under her feet, and this overbearing, insolent puppy, his son, —maybe they may one and all have such need of me, that they may beg at my feet, instead of putting their feet on my neck."

There was a concentrated quintessence of hate and triumph in his voice and tone as he said this, that made his uncle stop short, and look up with surprise and open eyes into his face. The look was one that occasioned very pleasurable emotions to his nephew. He had been compelled to feel himself very small and powerless before his uncle. But his uncle's look, as translated by his mind, was one that recognized power in him. He had been doubting, very irresolutely, how far he should go in revealing to his uncle the secret of which he held the solution in his hand. But the exceeding gratification, which a mind, constituted as his was, feels in compelling the recognition, on the part of his betters, of the necessity of submitting themselves to his will, urged him on with a strength that it was not in the power of his usually dominant caution to resist.

"I suppose you mean something!" said

Ben, as he thus looked up into his face; "but I'm blessed if I can guess what it is! If you have any mind, nevvvy, that a plain man should understand what you mean, you had better speak a little plainer!"

"You know what you told me, uncle," said Ikey, after another but shorter pause; "you know what you told me, when you was in such a devil of a hurry to get into a passion, because you took for earnest what I said in joke, about your keeping John Cornland's money for yourself. . . ."

Ben nodded his recognition of the circumstance alluded to.

". . . . You told me, you know, that it depended upon you to divide their uncle's property between them, or to give it all to one, just as you might think fit. . . ."

"According as I might think would be what their uncle would wish," said Ben, correcting his nephew's statement.

"Yes, of course! just so! But if you've got no written instructions, you know, you can only do it according as you think he might have wished under circumstances, which, perhaps, may not be altogether the same as

he supposed they were," said Ikey, still cautiously.

"I'll tell 'e what it is, you're too long-winded for me, nevvv. The thing seems plain enough, but you cover it up in such a blessed lot of words, that I begin to think I don't understand it myself!" said Ben, stopping in his walk, and planting the stick he had now finished to his satisfaction, firmly on the ground.

"I mean that if it should so turn out, that matters is very different respecting those boys from what their uncle thought, you would have to act different in the matter," pursued Ikey.

"He knew little or nothing about the boys; and that's just why he wished me to act for him in the matter," said Ben.

"Just so! But when a man has two sons, one or other of them must be the eldest, and one the youngest. Mr. John Cornland knew at all events that much!" with the air of an examining counsel, leading an unwilling witness on to make some damaging admission.

"In course he knew that!" said Ben, staring at him.

"And he knew which was the eldest?"

"Which? How do you mean? He knew that the eldest was called Charles! But what signifies a name?" returned Ben, still mystified.

"No, the name don't signify, if the thing is the real thing. But suppose now, for instance," and here Ikey dropped his voice almost to a whisper, and let his words fall slowly from his lips, while his eyes peered curiously, but furtively, at his uncle's face from under his eyebrows "Suppose, for instance, that the reality of the things was just contrawise to the seeming of it! Suppose that the boy who has always passed and been brought up for the eldest was the youngest, and the youngest was, in truth, the eldest! How would it be then?"

"I'm blessed if talking to you, nevvvy, is not as bad as guessing riddles all through! How is it possible that a father don't know which of his two boys is the oldest? Why don't you speak out plain what you are driving at . . . if you have any meaning at all?"

"Oh, you may be sure I don't often speak without a meaning, Uncle! I've meaning

enough ; and you'll see that it's clear enough. Yes, a father *knows* sure enough which boy is the oldest ! But, suppose he chooses to make out that the youngest is the eldest ? Suppose he plots to rob his eldest son of his birthright ? For that is what it comes to ! How would it be if that were the case ?”

“You don't mean to tell me, I suppose,” said Ben, starting and staring, as if he had suddenly seen a viper in the path before him, “you don't mean to tell me that you have any reason to suppose that Charles Cornland has done any such thing as that—that his boy Charles is younger than Peter—that Peter is really the eldest son ?”

Ikey only answered these interrogations by a series of very decided affirmative nods of the head at each clause of Ben's questioning.

“Why ! What sort of a cock-and-bull tale have you hold of there ? . . . Bah ! it is just out-and-out nonsense !” said Ben, coming gradually to a comfortable conviction that it was so, as he spoke.

“Nonsense ! Is it ? You'll see whether it is nonsense, uncle, and so, I'm thinking, they

will, if they don't mind what they are about!" said Ikey, with a menacing scowl.

"It can't be! And, according to your story, do the boys themselves know all about it, which is the elder and which the younger, pray?" said Ben.

"Not a bit of it! The boys know nothing about it," replied Ikey.

"In Heaven's name, then, when was the change made? When did it begin for Charles to be considered and taught to think himself the elder brother? I don't believe a word of it," said Ben, resolutely.

"You'll see! Why, it began directly after—or, anyway, very soon after the birth of the second son. The eldest boy was a very weakly and sickly child, and did not promise much in any way. Then came the second, and he was a very fine child. He favoured his father and the Cornlands, too, which the other didn't. And all that made the temptation to Cornland to make out that Charles was the eldest, who was to inherit his mother's money! That's how it was," said Ikey.

"And the mother—what did she say to it?" asked Ben, almost beginning to be persuaded.

that it must be as Ikey said, so clear was his assertion, and so perfectly did he seem to know all about it.

"The mother! She never had anything to say to it. How should she? She died very soon after the birth of her second child," returned Ikey.

"And the boys themselves have no idea, you say, but that Charles is the elder and Peter the younger brother?" asked Ben again, still, finding it difficult to realise what seemed to him so outrageously extraordinary.

"No—the boys know nothing about it; and a terrible down-come it will be for Master Charles when he does come to know it. You mark my words. It will go well nigh to break his heart," said Ikey, with savage chuckling over the greatness of the suffering he foresaw.

"Who were the parties, then, that were up to the trick—that is, according to your notion? . . . For I *can't* believe yet that it is really true," said Ben, looking greatly distressed and discomfited.

"Why the farmer and his sister—Charles Cornland and Miss Miranda! The children were sent away from the island when they

were quite babies, and when they came back nobody was any the wiser at least very few were," said Ikey, with a wink.

"And how did they manage about the names, then? Did they change the children's names too—or how?" said Ben, looking sharply at his nephew, as if he had hit upon a plan of confuting all his strange story.

"Ah, that was the difficulty! They could not well change the names of the two children! How could they? There was the woman that took them away, she knew that one was Charles and the other Peter. The children had learned their own names. And then, you see, Charles was named after his father, and Cornland did not like to give that up. He was pleased to think it should be Charles Cornland, and just such another as himself, who was to have all he could leave him. So they were obliged to let Charles be Charles, and Peter be Peter, as they were," explained Ikey so readily and simply that his uncle was gradually finding himself compelled to think his story must be true.

"But how about the parish register?" asked Ben again. "I suppose the children were

baptized ; and if so, then, you will find in the register that Peter was the eldest son of Charles Cornland, and Charles the second son," said Ben, bringing his whole mind to bear upon the subject.

" Ah ! you will find that in the register, you think ? Yes, the children were both baptized in the parish church, and you can go and look at the register yourself, uncle, if you like ; but somehow or other, I don't know how it is, but it does sometimes happen that all people put into the registers don't stay there," said Ikey, with a look of intense slyness.

" You mean," returned his uncle, after staring at him for a minute in silence " I *suppose* you mean that the register has been played tricks with. *Is* that what you mean ?"

" Well, you know, tampering with a register that's felony !" said Ikey, looking his uncle hard in the face.

" Felony or not, I know it's damn'd rascality," said Ben.

" Ah, maybe ! But it *is* felony ! And I am not going to bring an accusation of felony against anybody not unless I should

be driven to it. I have told you the truth, uncle, and I thought that it was my duty to tell it you. And you will have to think what you had best do as to John Cornland's property, I mean," said Ikey.

"Do! . . . but God bless my soul if this is not all a cock-and-bull story of yours if it's not some unaccountable blunder you've got in your head why I can't stand by and see wrong done and say nothing!" said Ben in much perplexity.

"Why what *would* you do?" asked Ikey.

"That's just what I don't know. I don't know what to do—I don't know what I ought to do! I don't know whether to believe all this history or not," said Ben, looking round him as if to ask counsel from the trees, and fields, and skies.

"One thing, of course you won't go and say anything of this to anybody in all the world, at all events for the present. I should be driven, if you were to, you see, to bring an accusation of felony in regular form," said Ikey.

Ben did not know at all what consequences bringing an accusation of felony in regular form

might involve ; but he felt, that in his extreme ignorance of the bearing of the whole matter, and of the means necessary for ascertaining whether Ikey's extraordinary statement was founded in fact or not, he needed better advice than he knew how to get where he was. So he answered cautiously enough,—

“I must think about it all, nevvv ! I don't know what to say about it. I mean to go up to town for a day or so to-morrow, and I'll think it over.”

“You are not going to London about this ?” cried Ikey in alarm, which did not escape his uncle's observation.

“No, no. I had made up my mind to go about quite a different matter. But I shall have time to think of it.”

Ben's statement was quite true. He had determined to run up to London upon a business which had no reference whatever to what Ikey had now told him. And though Ikey did not above half believe him, he felt the greatest curiosity to know what his uncle could possibly want to go to town about. And his curiosity was not unmingled with a certain degree of anxiety.

"I'll tell you what, uncle, if it would be a comfort to you—as of course it would—I'll go up with you, and never charge you a farthing. I *have* some business of my own, so that I need not put even the journey to your account. It shan't cost you a halfpenny. And strange as you must be to London and its ways, after so many years absence, it will be every thing to have an experienced person you can rely on with you," said he, eagerly.

"Well, it is really very kind of you to offer to come and take care of me free, gratis, for nothing, nevvvy; but, you see, I havn't had many such offers in my life, and the consequences is, I've learned to take care of myself. So I think I won't trouble you. I'll go alone."

"Well, you know, uncle, a wilful man must have his way," said Ikey, who saw that there was not the slightest hope of gaining his point.

"And I have always been a very wilful man, so I must have mine," said Ben.

"When do you think of starting?" asked his nephew.


"To-morrow morning; and I shall be back,

I hope, the next day but one and then we'll talk about what you have been telling me."

And then they separated, Mr. Batt declining to go on then to the vicarage to be presented to Miss Ironside, as his nephew proposed, on the plea that he wanted to return to the farm to prepare for his start on the morrow, while Ikey walked on alone towards Mr. Ironside's house.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE RAIL.

 R. BATT did not tell to any one of the circle at the farm—not even to his son—what was the purpose of his journey to London, but started the next morning with his carpet-bag in his hand by himself, and reached his destination without having once felt the want of his nephew's care and protection. He had reason, indeed, during the journey, to congratulate himself on the circumstance of his being alone. For, as it happened, he was able to pick up some information which was useful to him, and which it would have been difficult for him to get at if his nephew had been sitting in the railway carriage at his side.

Arriving, with his bag in his hand, at the little station, he saw on the platform a man whom he at once recognised as a person whom he had a good many years ago known in Australia.

"What, Jenkinson, is that you? Who'd have thought of meeting you in these diggings? What brings you to the old world, eh?" cried Mr. Batt, holding out the hand unoccupied by the carpet-bag to the stranger.

"I heard you were in this neighbourhood, Mr. Batt. Hope I see you well, sir. What brings me here is soon told. Soon after we last met, I entered the service of the old governor, Sir James; and after his death I remained with Lady Cartershaw, and came down here in attendance on her ladyship, when she came to visit her sister. It was my mistress that told me she had seen you at Mr. Stilwinche's."

"Yes, I saw her ladyship there. Well, and how are you, old fellow? You don't look a day older since I last saw you."

"Pretty well for that, Mr. Batt. I've got an easy berth of it. No need to ask how you are, sir. No need, either, to ask how the

world has used you, sir. All the colony knows that there was few men had had the success that Mr. Benjamin Batt had and there was not one that did not say he deserved it," with a genuine Englishman's reverence for the man who had made the world his oyster and well opened it.

"Thankee, Jenkinson. Are you for London this morning?"

"Yes, Mr. Batt; I'm just going to run up to see that all is ready at her ladyship's house to receive her, and her sister, Mrs. Nesbitt, who is going to return to town with her."

"Come along then," said Mr. Batt, stepping into a carriage; "let's sit together and have a little talk of old times as we go along."

Mr. Batt had not the slightest meaning or intention in what he said, beyond that which appeared on the face of it. But the talk between the two old acquaintances had not proceeded far, before it chanced to touch on a subject which, at that present moment, happened to have an especial interest for him.

"Oh, it don't always follow, though, mind ye," Mr. Batt was saying, in reply to some

complimentary remarks on his own career by Mr. Jenkinson, "that a fellow goes to the bad because he's a scoundrel. It's all very fine saying honesty is the best policy. And so it is, maybe, if there is sommat a man values more than money. But if money is all in all to him, mayhap there may be other policies that will suit his book better than honesty. Do you remember a man of the name of Bolder?"

"Aaron Bolder? To be sure I do. There's not many in the colony as don't remember him—by name any ways, and won't forget him in a hurry," said Mr. Jenkinson.

"Well, now, look at that man. If ever there was an out and out bad 'un, it was Aaron Bolder . . . and he died one of the richest men in the colony," said Mr. Batt.

"He did indeed! left his widow a power of money they say. Yes, he was a regular blackguard, and as big a ruffian as ever cheated the hangman. And a cheat it was that he should have died in any other way than by the rope," said Mr. Jenkinson.

"I always thought that he could have told

all about it, that time that the gold convoy was robbed—don't you remember?"

"I should think I did too. My patience, what a talk it made. I remember all the row there was about it at Government House. Told all about it! Bless you, yes. I've no more doubt that it was Aaron Bolder did that job, than I have that I didn't. Why none on'em at Government House was not in any two minds about it—only they could not get any evidence to bring it home to him."

"I lost a bit of money myself by that robbery," said Mr. Batt.

"There was a many that did. It was one of the biggest convoys that had been sent down for a long time; and a precious big haul that scoundrel must have had of it. And to think that such a fellow as that should marry a woman with a pot of money."

"Why, who was it he married then?" asked Mr. Batt.

"The widow of old Smithers, the dealer, up the diggings."

"To be sure, I remember now you mention it. Yes, I suppose she must have had a good bit of money," said Mr. Batt.

“Ay, old Smithers died a rich man. He had been at it a many years, and left his widow a rich woman ; and what must she do, but go and listen to that everlasting scamp, Aaron Bolder, and bring all old Smithers’ money to him.”

“Money draws money. I suppose that’s where it is. She married Bolder because he was a rich man already. Did she have any children ?”

“Not by her second husband. There was one son she had by old Smithers. Bolder they say could not abide the child. If he had not died himself, he would have most likely have been the death of it,” said Jenkinson.

“And what became of the widow after his death ? Is she still in the colony ?” asked Mr. Batt, talking merely for conversation’s sake.

“No, I take it not. She went to Europe, taking her boy with her, and Susy Smithers, her first husband’s sister for her maid. She was good to Susy. For when old Smithers died, Susy hadn’t a farthing to buy herself a crust of bread with, and didn’t know where to look for one. And Mrs. Bolder, as she was

soon after, stuck to her. She made a servant of her, it is true ; and Susy was just as fit to be a lady as her mistress was, which was just not at all. But then Mrs. Bolder went back to Europe a very rich woman, and Susy Smithers hadn't the price of a crust in the world," said Jenkinson.

"Took Susy Smithers with her to Europe as her maid," said Mr. Batt, with a little start and a queer little smile. "I wonder," he said, and then paused, evidently busied with his own thoughts—"I wonder whether . . . do you know, Mr. Jenkinson, at all what became of Mrs. Bolder after her return to Europe?"

"No, I never heard any thing more of her whether she is still alive or not I don't know. She may have married again, perhaps. She must have had money enough to tempt many a man," remarked Mr. Jenkinson.

"And you don't know any body in this country who knew her out in the colony, or is likely to know anything of her whereabouts since?" asked Mr. Batt, with more of interest in the matter than he had before shewn.

"Why, Mr. Batt, sir? Are you thinking

of looking after the widow yourself, sir. A man might do worse perhaps," said Mr. Jenkinson, smiling.

"Not I, Mr. Jenkinson. I had no such thought in my head ; but I have a reason for wanting to know what became of this Mrs. Bolder. I wonder whether I could find anybody in this country who knew anything about her," said Mr. Batt, turning the matter over in his mind.

"Well, I should think that she could not be over anxious to keep up any connexion with any of the folks who knew her on the other side of the water. Depend upon it she has done her best to leave no scent behind her. Who knows whether she mightn't take up some other name when she came over here, and so make a fresh start altogether. I should not think it at all unlikely for my part," said Mr Jenkinson.

"You have never heard a word from anybody about her since you were over here?" said Batt.

"Not a word. I often see many of them I know'd in the colony too. But till you chanced to speak of that fellow Bolder just now I

have never heard of him or his name since I left the colony ; nor ever so much as thought of them," returned Jenkinson.

"I suppose you'd know her again if you was to see her—Bolder's widow, I mean," said Batt after a pause.

"I don't know that I should. People change so, especially when their circumstances is changed. She might be a lady with a box at the hopera and a mansion in Grosvenor Square now as likely as not. Who knows where you mightn't find her," said Mr. Jenkinson, moralizing on the mutability of fortune, and the ups and downs of life.

"I'd lay a wager I should know her again if I was to set eyes on her for all that," said Ben, screwing up his eyes as if he were striving to peer with them into the dim recesses of memory.

"What can you want of her, Mr. Batt ; if there's no offence in asking," said Mr. Jenkinson ; "I shouldn't ha' thought that any body would ha' much looked after the honour of Mrs. Boulder's acquaintance from what I remember of her," said Jenkinson.

"No offence at all. Fact is, I've a notion

that I do know where to find her. But I want to be certain it is the same person, and to have the means of proving to others that it is the same person," said Batt.

"Nothing with reference to that gold robbery job?" asked Jenkinson.

"Oh, no! Nothing on earth to do with that. Nothing of any kind of interest to me one way or another. . . . Only I fancy that if I could put my finger on her, and had the means of saying for certain, 'you are Aaron Bolder's widow, ma'am, and nobody else,' I should do a good turn to somebody I know,—and without doing her any hurt neither," said Mr. Batt.

"Well, I don't know, I am sure," said Mr. Jenkinson, reflecting. And then there was a pause of silence, during which both speakers seemed to be endeavouring to consult their old recollections.

"I've been trying to remember," said Mr. Jenkinson at last, "and I think I've got hold of a chance that might lead to the finding of what you want. I remember that Old Smithers, many years ago, when he was a struggling man just setting up the trade he

made so much by afterwards, once got me to back a bill for him. It was for a very small sum, and it was drawn upon his brother Robert Smithers; and I remember that he told me that this brother was a marine store dealer in Ratcliff Highway. Now I should think that if any body was likely to be able to tell you what you want, it would be this Robert Smithers, especially as the widow took Susy Smithers, her sister-in-law, home with her to the old country. But then it's a many years ago; and heaven knows whether you may be able to find this Robert Smithers; he must be quite an old man now, if he is alive," said Jenkinson.

"And if he is, it's hardly likely that he should still be dealing in marine stores, as they call old bottles and fire-irons, in the same place," said Mr. Batt.

"No, maybe not; but likely enough you might be able to find out where he had gone to—if it's worth the trouble," replied Mr. Jenkinson.

"Oh, that's nothing; I don't mind the trouble a brass farthing. I'll try it, anyway. In the Ratcliff Highway, you said; where-

abouts is that ? Isn't it a place where sailors hang out ?" said Ben.


" Yes ; away to the east—ever such a way off—not far from the Tower of London. You get into a cab, and tell the man to take you to Ratcliff Highway, and he'll know where to carry you, and then you'll have to hunt for yourself," said his friend.

" I can do that, never fear. If Mr. Robert Smithers, marine store dealer, is anywhere in those parts, I'll go bail I find him."

Then the two old acquaintances talked of other matters till the train deposited them at the Victoria Station about ten o'clock in the morning. And Mr. Batt, after shaking hands with Mr. Jenkinson, determining to let no grass grow beneath his feet, started at once on his quest after Mr. Robert Smithers, marine store dealer, Ratcliff Highway.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT TO HIGMAN'S ROAD.

“ATCLIFF HIGHWAY!” said Mr. Batt, short and sharp to the driver, as he jumped into a Hansom cab.

The order produced a keen glance at his fare from the cabman, and the query—

“What number, sir?”

“Ratcliff Highway! when you get there you will have done your job; never you mind the number.”

Mr. Batt could not help thinking that London must have grown a great deal bigger since he knew it as an errand boy in the agricultural implement manufactory of Messrs. Stanton, Cornland, and Co. He thought the

journey to Ratcliff Highway would never come to an end, and he would fain have exchanged ideas upon the subject with his driver, but the position of the latter, perched up on his seat behind the vehicle, rendered this impossible.

At last, after sundry varied zones of the London world, changing from business-like west end to aristocratic west end, thence to shabby central, and from that to the pericardial regions of the commerce of the world, and finally by a far more rapid diminuendo process to the peculiar fore-castle-like sordidness of the district he was in search of, had been passed, cabby pulled up sharp in front of a gin palace, flanked by an establishment for the sale of slop clothing on one side, and by another similar emporium on the other side, and jumping down from his perch said cheerily, "Here you are, sir." The payment of his demand in full without observation caused the man to cast another sharp glance of curiosity at Mr. Batt as he turned, with a short "Thank'e, sir!" and a forefinger to his hat, to resume his seat, saying to himself as he did so, "First mate he'll be! don't think he is a

cap'n! Just off a voyage, you may swear, he's so flush with his money!"

Mr. Batt at the same moment spying a postman on the opposite side of the way, dashed across the road, thinking that a very favourable opportunity for beginning his inquiries, but the postman shook his head.

"Smithers, marine store dealer! don't know the name anywhere in these parts. There's Smithers and Barncomes at the other end of the Way, but they are distillers, and that's a different thing. A marine store dealer! If it's some years, perhaps," continued the postman, recognising at a glance the fact that Mr. Batt had recently come from foreign parts, "since you heard anything of your friend, it's like enough you may have difficulty in finding him. Marine store dealers ain't a very bideable sort, they ain't. They are often here to-day and gone to-morrow, they are!" said the postman, unaware of the singular restriction he was applying to a moral intended to bear a wider signification. "Try at the public-house there," added the public functionary, turning away in a hurry to make up the moments he had been robbed of.

Mr. Batt did try the public-house, but with little better success.

"Don't know the name," replied curtly the stout, florid, white-aproned barman, who could with difficulty spare a moment from the business of dispensing doses of poison. But a tremulous little old man, who was sitting on a small barrel in a corner behind the door, having heard the inquiry, piped out in a shrill quivering treble as Mr. Batt was turning to leave the shop—

"Smithers, a marine store dealer! I remember the man! Yes, he kep' a shop in the Way. But Lord bless you, that must be ten year ago, if it's a day. You might as well hope to find last Saturday night," said the shaky little old man, with a strong sense of the mutability of human affairs, and the irrevocable lapse of time; "ten to one he's dead—though they mostly lives long, marine store dealers does," continued the old fellow; "but I'll tell ye, the best place to ask is the sail-makers, a good bit down the other side of the way, Brocklesby and Jones, you'll see the name wrote up. They are a very old established business, and knows mostly every-

body as has lived here since time out of mind. You had best try there."

So to the sailmakers Ben betook himself, and had no difficulty in finding the shop. The general aspect of the place at once assured him that he would at least find here an advantage for the prosecution of his inquiries that was not afforded by either of the other sources of information he had applied to. Here, at least, there was no manifestation of hurry. It was a low-roofed dark shop, pervaded by a smell of tar and hemp, and when the door of it shut out the roar of the street, seemed, by the force of contrast, the abode of quiet and repose. There was no customer in the place, and nobody standing behind the counter. But in a far dark corner there was an elderly man sitting on a low stool, and engaged, apparently, in measuring canvas, and to him Ben made his application.

"Robert Smithers, dealer in marine stores?" repeated the person addressed, laying aside his measuring wand, and setting himself deliberately to the task of remembering.

"Yes, I remember the name. There was such a person kept shop in the Way, but it's

a long time ago. My notion is, that he put together a bit of money and retired, but I'm not sure. And as to where he went, and whether he is still alive, I know no more than you do."

"Where do you think there'd be any likelihood of getting any information about him—that is, as to where he went when he left this neighbourhood?" asked Batt.

"Well, it's hard to say. This is not a sort of a neighbourhood where people generally leave much remembrance of themselves behind 'em. Stay, I'll tell you how you might, perhaps, hear what you want. I remember that the man you speak of married a wife a little before he left his shop in the Way. I remember it, because there was a talk about it. He was an old man, and she was a very pretty young girl. She was the daughter of a dealer in ship chronometers, and compasses, and glasses, and the like. I dare say her father is dead, but I know there is the same name now—Baldock, in the Minories; you will have no difficulty in finding it. I take it, the man who has the business now must be the brother of the girl old Smithers mar-

ried, and he would most likely know where his sister and her husband, if he is still alive, are."

Batt thanked his informant very heartily, and lost no time in making his way to the shop of Mr. Baldock, in the Minorities.

Ben looked very much like the sort of people who came to Mr. Baldock to purchase the goods he dealt in ; and, no doubt, it was a disappointment to him, when he found that the new comer did not present himself in the guise of a customer. To Mr. Batt's enquiry for Mr. Baldock, a man behind the counter replied that his name was Baldock ; but his look and his manner were such, as to suggest to his visitor that there could have been no family likeness between him and his sister.

" Mr. Smithers don't live anywhere in this neighbourhood now," he said, surlily enough, when he had heard what Mr. Batt had to say ; " and it's a long time since he left it."

" So I have understood," said Ben ; " and my object in troubling you was to learn where he has gone to live."

" Humph ! He does not live anywhere near here," returned Mr. Baldock, more surlily than ever.

"But I should not mind the trouble of finding him, if I knew where to look for him ; I want to speak to him !" said Mr. Batt.

"But it might be that he mightn't want to speak to you. May I ask what your name is if it's no ways inconvenient to tell it ?" said Mr. Baldock.

"No inconvenience at all, Mr. Baldock, to tell my name to anybody that cares to know it. My name is Benjamin Batt, at your service," said Ben.

"It's a name I never heard of before !" said Mr. Baldock, in a tone which seemed as if the words ought naturally to be followed by "nor anybody else either ?" "But, perhaps, you would have no objection to mention the nature of your business Mrs. Smithers, as you are aware, is my sister," he added.

"Well," said Mr. Batt, thinking it better not to trouble Mr. Baldock with the particulars of his reasons for wishing to see his brother-in-law ; "the fact is, I have recently returned from Australia, and I knew Mr. Smithers, the brother of your brother-in-law, very well. You are aware, I presume, that he died a few

years ago leaving a considerable amount of property and I think that Mr. Robert Smithers would not be unwilling to see me."

"I believe that Mr. Joseph Smithers left a widow?" said Mr. Baldock.

"He did, and she married again a man of not very good character, unfortunately. However, she was left a widow a second time and it might be worth Mr. Robert Smithers' while, you know . . ." said Ben, looking at him.

"Well, I don't know that there can be any harm in giving you his present address. He's a very old man now, and not very fit for speaking on business. You had better speak to my sister. In fact, I don't know whether you can see the old man."

"Well, I shall have no objection to speak to Mrs. Smithers," said Ben.

"Well, then, this is where he lives;—Nugget Villa, Bellevue Terrace, Higman's road, Black-wall. If you ask for the 'Higman's Arms,' at the corner of Higman's Road, they'll tell you where the place is."

And, furnished with this information, Mr.

Batt chartered another cab, and started for Higman's Road, Blackwall, on his renewed quest.

The cabman was obliged to make sundry enquiries before he succeeded in executing the task assigned him ; but at length Mr. Batt was put down in front of the "Higman's Arms," at the corner of Higman's Road. The region was one of those newly inhabited districts, which look as if they had been born to a heritage of premature decrepitude. All looked unmistakably new ; and yet there was an air of squalor and out-of-repair slovenliness over the whole region, which seemed to protest against the attempt to adapt the place to human habitation, in the language of the epitaph chosen for the tombstone of a few-weeks'-old infant :

"Since I so soon am dead and done for,
I wonder what I was begun for !"

The original projector of the settlement,—Higman, it is to be presumed—must have considered it to have been marked out for his purposes by the peculiarity of the combination of brickfield and cinder-heap deposit, which appeared to be its special characteristic. But

these features had an indescribable air of having suffered a sea-change, such as might be supposed to be produced by the inhabitants of the place having been the denizens of bankrupt forecastles, instead of bankrupt land-dwellings.

"Higman's Arms" were apparently the most prosperous and well-to-do thing about him. But even they hung rather listlessly at the corner of his road, and seemed to suffer from an indecision of purpose, which made it doubtful whether the establishment should properly be classed as gin palace, coffee shop, ginger-beer manufactory, or utterly hopeless and bankrupt lodgings for single gentlemen. On the doorstep of the "Higman's Arms," however, there stood, as Mr. Batt drove up, a listless individual, who gave one the idea of an ostler suffering from intense nostalgia, in consequence of having been transported to a region where there were no horses—or, at least, none with which he was in any way connected. He was probably trying to combine the parts of land-lord and potboy of "The Arms," and looked miserably conscious of utter failure in either capacity.

On asking of this individual if he knew the whereabouts of Nugget Villa, there was no greater delay in obtaining the required information, than was needed for the satisfactory completion of a huge yawn, by the party in question.

"Bellevue Terrace! Half way up the road, right-hand side, behind Sharling and Twiner's rope factory!" said the landlord-potboy.

"What number?" asked Mr. Batt.

"Number one, I s'pose!" said the man, in the tone of one who considers that he has made a joke; "there ain't no other 'ouse in the terrace . . . and ain't like to be, so far as I see! You can't go wrong, you'll see the name wrote up!" he added.

Mr. Batt did not go wrong. At the corner of a dark-looking lane, which opened out of Higman's Road, and passed behind the long dead wall of a rope manufactory, without any apparent intention of going anywhere in particular, Mr. Batt saw a post with a strip of unpainted deal nailed across it, on which was written, "Bellevue Terrace." And following this lane till he had reached about the middle of the dead wall, which formed one side of it,

he found himself in front of a square little box of white bricks, with a door and five bright green windows in the front of it, and a huge board extending across the whole front of the building, and raised above the roof of it, on which NUGGET VILLA was painted in letters nearly as large as the windows of the house.

The house was separated from the lane by a small space of ground, about equal in extent to the area occupied by the building, which was mainly occupied by a singular collection of objects, that seemed to be selections from the remaining stock-in-trade of the marine store dealer, made at the time of his retirement from active life. Mr. Batt passed through this interesting collection of remembrances by a little stone-flagged path that led from the lane to the door of the dwelling, and having pulled a bell by a brass handle of strange shape, that looked as if it had once formed part of some scientific instrument, was received by a lady, whom he immediately judged to be the once beautiful Miss Baldock, now Mrs. Smithers, and mistress of the door she opened.

She was a woman who would have been

very pretty still, if slatternliness, ill temper, disappointment, vexation, shrewishness, and an expression of aggressive impudence had not contributed to destroy all pleasantness of appearance. She had a rakish fly-away cap with broad pink ribbons on her head, which would not have been unbecoming in a somewhat disreputable style, if it had been less dirty, and the face beneath it less pinched and faded.

"Yes, Mr. Smithers lives here in his own house. And he was formerly of Ratcliff High Way," said the woman in answer to Ben's query ; "may I ask what it is you want with him ?" she added, without showing the smallest intention of opening the door widely enough to admit her visitor.

"I was well acquainted with his brother in Australia, who died some years ago. My name is Benjamin Batt, tolerably well known in the colony. I wanted to ask what had become of my old friend's widow ?" said Ben, in as civil and insinuating a manner as he could master.

The woman seemed more than half inclined to shut the door in his face ; but on second

thoughts, the consideration that some possible profit might arise out of what the stranger might have to say, while it could hardly be that any loss could ensue from it, joined perhaps to the effect produced by his own smart personal appearance, bright eyes, and cheery-looking white teeth, prevailed to suggest milder counsels, and she said, opening the door still hesitatingly,—

“Perhaps you will walk in? I don’t know that you can see Mr. Smithers. He’s ill a-bed. But what you have got to say, you can say to me. Mr. Smithers is my ’usband.”

Mr. Batt accepted this somewhat ungracious invitation without any appearance of having been rebutted by the sour manner of the woman, and was led into a little square sitting room, which seemed to have been furnished from the same store-house that had supplied the garden ornamentation. There was a small morsel of coal fire in the grate, and on the fire a large iron saucepan. Mrs. Smithers pointed to a chair, as she herself sat down in another.

“My ’usband’s brother may have been *your* friend, sir,” the lady began, “but he was no

friend to my 'usband or me. He died very well off, as we understood; but he never gave a thought to his own kith and kin. Everything went to the woman he married."

"Ah, and a great shame it was—specially as she was married in less than no time after her husband's death to another man," sympathized Ben.

"And he was a party very well to do, as we have understood," returned Mrs. Smithers. "And she now a widow a second time."

Here a thumping was heard from the adjoining room, as if the leg of a chair were struck paviour fashion against the floor, and a high treble voice, quavering with age and anger, crying out,—

"Who is there? I say, Sukie, who have you got there? If it's anybody on business, let him come in here."

Mrs. Smithers got up, and opening a little a door leading into the room where the old man was in bed, said, very sourly,—

"There, you have no call to worrit yourself, Mr. S. It ain't nothing as you need meddle with. You go to sleep; that's the best thing for you."

And so saying the amiable lady shut with a bang the door of communication between the two chambers.

"Yes," resumed Ben, "she married one Aaron Bolder, and he had a deal of money too. And now she has got all his property. It's too bad that she should not do something for the family of her first husband, instead of having her own husband's sister in her house as her maid."

"Ah, you know that game, then, that she was up to. My poor sister-in-law was left by her brother without the value of a crust of bread. And what does this beggar-on-horse-back do but offer to keep her as her servant. Why not settle something fitting upon her, and let her come to her own people?" said Mrs. Robert Smithers, with much bitterness.

"To be sure. It's no more than she ought to do. And maybe she would do it, if anybody was to tell her what she ought to do—anybody that she would be likely to mind, you know, ma'am. And I don't mind telling you, since you are her sister-in-law, that if I had a chance of speaking my mind to Mrs. Bolder, I am inclined to think she would not

be unlikely to let herself be persuaded. Very old acquaintances Mrs. Bolder and I are, and we pretty well know each other. But I have lost sight of her since she left the colony. I suppose you know where she is?"

Here the thumping in the inner room was renewed more violently than before, and the quavering voice of the old man, screaming at the utmost pitch of his voice, made itself heard from the other side of the door.

"Sukie! don't you go for to tell nothing about my sister-in-law—not till I have spoke to the gentleman. If he has anything to say about my brother's affairs, let him come in here and speak to me. I can speak to him well enough."

"Never mind him, sir. He is grown quite silly like, and is very fractious at times. There's no reason that I know why I should not tell you where my sister-in-law is. If you was a friend of her poor first 'usband, I am sure that you wouldn't wish nothing else than to see right done to his family. If she is Mrs. Bolder now, a widow is not answerable for nothing, and anybody may call theirselves by any name they pleases, I suppose," said Mrs. Smithers.

"To be sure they may. There ain't no law against that, as I ever heard tell of. I don't wonder at Mrs. Bolder wanting to change her name, when she came over to England. She didn't make any improvement when she changed it from Smithers to Bolder, any way. What does she call herself now, then?" asked Mr. Batt, insinuatingly.

"She have took the name of Fitzwilliam, and she lives in a grand house down Pimlico way. You go to No. 19, Arcager Willas, Boiler Avenue, Pimlico, and ask for Mrs. Fitzwilliam, and you'll find her. But you mustn't let on that you know'd from us where to find her, or all the fat would be in the fire. There's not a soul in all England knows that Mrs. Fitzwilliam, of Arcager Willas, is Mrs. Bolder as was, except ourselves."

"Of course I shall take care of that, Mrs. Smithers. Much obliged to you for your information. You may depend upon it I shall make a good use of it," said Mr. Batt, rising to bring his visit to an end.

"And when shall we hear from you again, sir?" said Mrs. Smithers, who was conscious of an uneasy feeling that her interview with


Mr. Batt had resulted in giving him what he wanted, without any sufficient assurance having been acquired by herself that any *quid pro quo* would result to her therefrom.

"Now I know where to find you, Mrs. Smithers, I shall be sure to let you know if I have anything agreeable to communicate. Good bye, ma'am."

And so saying Mr. Batt bowed himself out of the cottage as quickly as possible, retraced his steps along the lane, regained the "Higman's Arms," where he obtained information from the landlord-potboy still lounging before the door, of the nearest cab-stand, and at once drove to No. 19, Arcadia Villas, Boiler Avenue, Pimlico, where he learned without any difficulty that Mrs. Fitzwilliam was then staying in the village of Whitton Parva, near Petheram, in Sussex.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT SYMONDS' INN.

HEN Mr. Batt had accomplished all the doings narrated in the last chapter, the day was much too far spent for it to be possible for him to make that afternoon, as he had intended, a visit to Doctors' Commons, where he had purposed ascertaining for himself, and with accuracy, the provisions of the wills both of old Mr. Stanton and of old Mr. Cornland, the agricultural implement maker. Not being able to put this purpose into execution, he resolved to put the time at his disposal to profit by seeking out the one person in all London with whom he felt that he should like to take counsel respecting his present position and duties with perfect unreserve.

This one trusted friend was (as is the case in more instances than the silly folks whose opinions are the mere flat echo of a not very brilliant joke are willing to allow) an attorney—one Amos Sylvester, of Symonds' Inn. He had been the legal adviser of the firm of Stanton and Cornland, and had for very many years done, for old Batt, their confidential clerk, and for Isaac, his son, any of those matters connected mainly with dying and marrying which required his professional assistance. And although Ben Batt's determination to seek his fortune in Australia, despite all that his father and his old mother could say or do to prevent him, had removed him for so many years out of the old attorney's ken, and caused him never to call upon Mr. Sylvester for any turn of his art, yet he well remembered him and the kindly intercourse there had once been between them, and the perfect trust which his father and his father's employers had ever placed in him.

So Ben, after a short pause for consideration, ordered his cabman to turn his horse's head eastward again and made his way from Pimlico to Symonds' Inn.

Both in the Higman's Road region and in the purlieus of Pimlico, it had seemed to Ben that London was a much changed place from what he had known it. But when he came to the old low-browed doorway leading from Chancery Lane into the Inn, which once, it is to be presumed, belonged to some Symonds, whose name has so much outlived his memory, it seemed to him that everything was in the exact state in which he had last seen it. The applewoman sitting on the curb-stone of the pavement might have been, as far as general appearance went, the identical dealer with whom he had expended pence some quarter of a century ago. The entrance to the Inn seemed neither more nor less dingy than it had always been within the memory of man. The little court into which it opened was neither more nor less intensely depressing in its melancholy tranquillity than of yore. The sallow-faced, slatternly woman who was crossing it with a tin-covered plate from a neighbouring eating-house, and who might be supposed to be called "laundress" on the *lucus-a-non-lucendo* principle, seemed to Ben's eye to be the very same who used to be doing

the same thing five-and-twenty years ago.

And there in the corner of the court, in the well-remembered black letters on the once white, but long since orange-coloured, door-post was the name of Mr. Sylvester, indicated as still occupying the same set of chambers on the ground floor to which Ben had carried so many messages. A strange feeling, as if all the intervening time, with all its history and events, had been blotted out and annihilated, and everything had gone back to be as it had been, came over Mr. Batt as he found himself tapping at Mr. Sylvester's inner door with the little brass knocker, as he tapped so many, many times before!

But the clerk who opened it broke the spell! To Mr. Batt's astonishment, so entirely was it already impressed upon him that he was engaged in some sort of Rip van Winkle adventure, instead of the coetaneous fellow-boy who used to welcome him with "What!—is that you, Ben? Come in and have a lark! The governor's busy, and you'll have to wait!" a middle-aged man in seedy black held the door in his hand, while he silently awaited the

nèw-comer's announcement of his business. Then Mr. Batt awoke from his trance, and said that, if Mr. Sylvester was disengaged, Mr. Benjamin Batt would be glad to see him.

The seedy man put his head into an inner room, and, withdrawing it in less than a minute, silently motioned to Mr. Batt to enter.

And there, sitting exactly in the old place, and doing apparently exactly the same things, and surrounded with exactly the same objects, sat a stout man, with a grey head, and spectacles, where Mr. Batt had left a slim man, with a black head, and no spectacles. The bundles of yellow-white papers, tied up with faded red tape, and lightly sprinkled with particles of soot, which were heaped on the office table before him, and on a side table which stood against the wall, seemed to be as they always used to seem, quite as much a permanent portion of the fitting up and furniture of the apartment as the tables and chairs, and the glazed and smut-mellowed table of descents in divers-coloured columns, curiously merging themselves into one another, which hung over the chimney-piece.

But the portly grey-headed figure jumped up briskly enough from the old windsor chair in which it was seated, and greeted the visitor with every demonstration of lively and friendly interest.

"Well!" said Mr. Sylvester, after the first words of surprise, and recognition, and welcome had passed, "there is not much need to ask you how the world has gone with you! There is something about the cut of a prosperous man that there's no mistaking! Well, all's well that ends well! But I thought it was a bad business when you and John riled the old folks so consumedly by saying good-bye to the old world; Yes! John, poor fellow! I know! I heard of it! He had done pretty well out there, hadn't he?"

"Yes, he did! . . . pretty well! And he and I always remained fast and close friends to the last! It was partly for the sake of old times, but partly, too, for the sake of having a word or two with you with reference to John Cornland's affairs that I have called on you."

"I am quite at your service . . . and hope you may not want much of it!—that's

the best thing I can wish you," said Mr. Sylvester with a ha! ha! ha! "No trouble, I hope?" he added.

"No, I think not—that is, not legal trouble. This is how the matter stands. John Cornland died worth about twenty thousand pounds. He made no will whatever; but on his death-bed handed over to me everything he had in the world, with very little instruction as to the disposal of it."

"Handed over to you In trust, I presume! There are his nephews, you know, and his brother Charles and"

"Yes, I've just come from their place down in Sussex! My own boy is staying with them. I sent him over to Charles to be taken care of. But now about this money of poor John's?"

"What is the nature of the instrument under which you hold the property? What is the scope of the trust?" inquired the lawyer.

"Devil a scrap of any instrument was there in the case, if you mean a writing of any sort. The trust is that the money is to be for his nephews, of course!" said Ben.

"You have no beneficial interest whatever?" again asked the lawyer.

"Anything but a benefit I should call it," said Ben. "But I shouldn't have thought of making any objection, not if the trouble had been twenty times as much."

"But excuse me. How do you hold the property," said the lawyer, appearing mystified.

"How do I hold it? Why the same way that you hold the half-crown in your pocket, if there happens to be one there. How should I hold it?" said Ben.

"What did the property consist of?" asked Mr. Sylvester.

"Shares in one thing or another, and money at the banks, and money lent at interest, and such like," said Ben.

"And you mean to say that all this was made over to you, just as I might hand you a shilling," said Mr. Sylvester with no little astonishment.

"Yes, just that. Only he told me what it was he wished me to do with it," rejoined Ben.

"Told you. And was that all? Was there no writing?"

"Not a scrap. But I have made a note of it. If I was to die this minute, them as come after me would find what they were to do with the money."

"And are you aware that if you choose to turn rogue you could keep all the property for yourself, and not all the courts in Christendom could take it from you?" said the lawyer, almost aghast at the thought that a man should be exposed to such a temptation.

"Yes, of course I know that; but that is not the question. The question is, how best to dispose of the property?" said Ben with a thoughtful air.

"Why, did you not say that it was to be for the nephews, Charles Cornland's boys?" said the lawyer.

"To be sure. So far is clear enough. But I've got to act according as their deceased uncle would have wished. Which boy is to have it? or is er'e a one to have it all? Don't you see the thing is not so easy."

"Humph! That ought to depend upon circumstances, I should say. I hope the lads and Charles Cornland himself will feel that

they are in the hands of a more upright man than one meets with every summer day."

"Of course John Cornland knew what he was about for that matter. But what I want you to do, sir, is just to find out a fact or two about those same circumstances you was speaking of just now," said Ben.

"Anything in my power. What is it you would wish to know?" asked Mr. Sylvester.

"Well, I should like to know exactly what it was that old Mr. Stanton said in his will about his money; and what was settled in the marriage settlement of Miss Jemima; and also I want an extract from the parish register of the parish where the boys were born," returned Ben.

"Well! There can be no difficulty in any of that. The will and the marriage settlement can be referred to without stirring from this room. As for the extract from the register, . . . what need can you have of that?" said the lawyer, breaking off and looking into Ben's face.

"Well, . . . I want to have it. . . In disposing of their uncle's twenty thousand pounds, you know, I ought to know all about

the boys that is of course one does know all about them. but in short I should like to have the certificates of their baptisms ; and if I can't get them without, I must go to the Island to get them myself. But I thought that very likely you might be able to manage it for me," said Ben, making rather a lame statement as to his motives, but speaking decisively enough as to his determination.

" Well, yes. It so happens, that I can get the certificates for you without any difficulty. I have by chance a correspondent in the Island. But will not you be running over there yourself to see your brother ?" asked the lawyer.

" Yes, I suppose I shall, but not just yet ; and I want this information as soon as possible. One ought not to leave such a matter unsettled, you know, any longer than one can help ; and I am anxious to get the money out of my hands. I left my nevy, Ikey's son, at Coppleford,—that's the name of Cornland's farm ; he came there it seems to see my boy Ben, and Cornland very kindly asked him to stay for my arrival."

"Ah! indeed! Then you have made acquaintance with your nephew?" said Mr. Sylvester, looking straight at Ben's face.

"Yes, I have," said Ben returning the look with an expression that produced a shake of the head from the attorney.

Ben answered the shake of the head by a grave nod.

"He is a member of our profession," said Mr. Sylvester, "and there has been a little ill-feeling, I am afraid, because I have not employed him as my correspondent there, having need of one. And for old time's sake I should have been very happy to do so, . . . but . . ."

"Of course, I understand. . . . Do you know at all how my brother has been going on?" said Ben.

"Well, not much. For many years I heard nothing of him at all, and should not then but for the chance of having some business in the Island. He is still parish clerk, I understand, though he might have given it up years ago if he had chosen to do so. For Mr. Ikey Batt is, I take it, a rich man."

"Parish clerks don't get rich on their places generally," objected Ben.

"No! His is an exceptionally lucrative berth though. But I fancy his clerkship has been the least part of his business. When you have got half-a-crown there is no way so quick for turning it into a crown as lending it. And there are people whose best customers are ruined men. And there are plenty of such in the Island.—You understand," said the lawyer with a grave nod.

"Yes, I see—and this youngster my nevvv?"

"Not that I have anything to say against father or son; you understand. Not a word. Only, you see" said the lawyer with a shrug; and then suddenly changing his tone, added cheerily, "But about yourself friend Ben? You have told me nothing about yourself yet. Are you back again in the old country for good and all? Or do you mean to go back and take another turn at the mill?"

"Well, that's as it may be—it depends. I've no call to go back there unless—well—unless I like it best."

"That's the ticket! I'm very glad to hear it, Ben, my boy! And you are not one, if I know you, to talk in that way, unless you

had made yourself pretty comfortable," said the lawyer, with a wink.

"Well, yes, pretty well for that matter. I've got but my one boy to think for, worse luck," added Ben, with a sigh.

"But it would not be wise, my friend, to make sure that you may not have others to think for. Why, you are but a youngster. You'll marry again, I'd wager a crown."

"Humph! Not much chance of that, I think; but put that I did do such a thing, there'd be bread and cheese for all, and no wrong done to my boy neither," with his hands in his breeches pockets, and looking into the lawyer's face with a pleasant smile.

"Ho, ho, say you so? Money will make the mare to go. How many figures does it walk into, eh, Ben?" said his old friend.

Ben held up the thumb and fingers of one hand.

"Five figures, upon my word? And what must the first figure be, eh—between old friends, now?"

Ben had recourse to pantomime again, and this time held up four fingers of his right hand.

"Forty thousand!" said the lawyer, pursing up his lips, and drawing back his head and shoulders. "By Jove! Well, sir, I congratulate you with all my heart," he added, stretching out his hand as he spoke to give a cordial grasp to the hand that had accumulated forty thousand pounds. "Bread and cheese for all, quotha!" he went on; "ay, and a good allowance of butter, too, I should say. Of course you will marry again, and I wish you life and a good wife to enjoy it with, with all my heart."

"You see I have pretty well feathered my boy's nest for him, any way," said Ben, with a sort of modesty in his tone.

"Indeed you have! You must let me make acquaintance with him. Is he a chip of the old block, eh?"

"Well, I sometimes think he is, only he has the advantage of a deal more education than ever I had. I ain't ashamed of him, any way. Yes, I'll bring him to see you, since you are so kind as to wish it. And you'll get those papers for me from the Isle of Man as soon as you can, eh?"

"I'll write for them by this evening's post.

My correspondent will get my letter by to-morrow evening ; we'll give him the next day to search the register. You can have the papers within three days from this."


"Thank ye, Mr. Sylvester. You can send them to me by post to Coppleford, near Petheram, Sussex. Good-bye! It won't be long before you see me again, . . . if I'm not too great an interruption to business."

"Nothing of the sort—delighted to see you! Always plenty of time to talk to as old a friend as you are."

And then Ben took leave of the old lawyer, and driving to the Victoria Station, was just in time to catch the evening train to Petheram, at which station he found his son waiting for him, with a bit of news that seemed to agitate him considerably.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POST OF DANGER.

“HERE is something the matter, Ben! What is it?” said Mr. Batt, the instant he saw his son upon the platform at Petheram Station.

“Matter enough!” returned his son; “they have got small-pox up at the Hall; two of the young ladies are down with it, and in such a family as that it is likely to run through the whole lot of them.”

“When did you hear the news?” asked his father.

“Only about mid-day to-day. There has been a little small-pox about in the village, it seems, for some little time past.”

“Have you been up to the house?”

"Yes; I went up to inquire about them directly. Of course I could be of no use in any way, that's the worst of it," said Ben, with a very rueful expression of countenance, and apparently a greater amount of concern than people are generally apt to feel at the mere illness of those unconnected with them save by neighbourhood.

"Which of the young ladies are they that are down?" asked his father.

"The twins, Miss Faith and Miss Charity, but of course there must be great danger of the others catching it. I saw the doctor coming away from the house, and he told me that both the young ladies were *very* ill, that the attack was of the most virulent kind," said Ben, looking with anxious eyes into his father's face.

"Poor girls! but bless you, people get well of the small-pox—more than die of it; and as for the others, of course they will take care to keep them apart," said Mr. Batt.

"It is to be hoped so, but I don't know. And if there is to be one more than another to run the risk of going into the sick room, I know well enough which it would be, and no mistake," said Ben.

"Which would it be, then?" asked his father, looking his son attentively in the face.

"Which? Why Beatrice, to be sure," said Ben, with a sort of angry indignation curiously mixed with proud satisfaction.

"Why should it be she, more than any one of the others?" said his father, still attentively observing him, and evidently speaking rather for the purpose of such observation, than for the sake of any information to be gathered from a reply to his question.

"Why?" re-echoed Ben, "because I know what she is. And I think I know what some of the others of them are too. Oh, I know how it will be."

"Well, there's Miss Pen, now, for instance," said his father.

"That's the eldest. They call her Miss Stilwinche. I don't know, I am sure, what she would be likely to do. She's an odd one, Miss Pen is. But look at the next, Miss Barbara; that one that you noticed me talking to the other day. I think I see her going near her sisters in the small pox! She'd let all creation go to pot, before she'd run the risk of having that white face of hers marked

with the small-pox. And then there's Miss Pernel. My notion is that number one is all in all with her. As for the others they are mere children. No, you'll see it will be Beatrice that will be in the sick room, morning, noon, and night. It is the willing horse that draws all the weight."

"And that don't suit your book, eh, Ben?" said his father, gravely.

"How should it? I would rather fifty times have the cursed thing myself, than that she should take it. Father, if that girl takes the sickness and dies, I tell you fairly I don't care a straw what becomes of me. Upon my soul I don't. I think I should go to the diggings, and take to drink, and kill myself. Not that I'd have her," he added, with a proud and almost defiant throwing up of his head—"I would not have her, if I could, to be one to think of nothing but keeping herself safe, like that Miss Barbara."

"You are right, my boy," said his father, shortly.

"But I can't tell you how miserable it makes me to think of what is likely to happen. I think I will go up there again, now, to find

out how they are going on. You don't mind my not walking home with you, father?" said Ben, with an expression of terrible and restless anxiety.

"Not I. I did want to have a bit of a talk with you, but another time will do for that. But I say, Ben, take care you don't be in the way, and make yourself troublesome up at the hall. People don't want strangers about a house when there is sickness in it," said his father.

"I know," acquiesced Ben, with a deep sigh; "I shall only try to speak a word to some one of the servants, to find out how they are going on, and what the doctor says, and who goes into the sick room. I shall be back at the farm in less than a couple of hours."

And then Mr. Batt set out on his walk to Copleford, while Ben took a nearer way to Combe Mavis Hall.

There the terrible verdict of the medical man, who had been called early that morning to the twins, had fallen like a bombshell on the family. The two girls, Faith and Charity, had sickened together. They had gone to

bed on the previous evening with headache, and a certain amount of sore throat, and general symptoms of feverishness. But it had not occurred to any one of the family to connect these appearances with the known fact that there had been a good deal of small-pox in the village recently. The next morning both the girls were very evidently worse. And then the family medical man was sent for, and at once pronounced the cases to be unmistakably small-pox. And the words spread terror and dismay throughout the household. Poor little Mr. Stilwinche was rather, but not much, more useless and helpless than a father of a family usually is apt to be on such occasions. After he had God-blessed himself several times, he seemed to have little else to say upon the matter; but took his spud in his hand and strolled forth into the park, the spudding of the weeds in which was no longer any interest of his, with an instinctive sense of the fact that the best thing he could do was to take himself out of the way, and a mind sadly recurring to the grievous length of doctors' bills running themselves up at the rate of three or four per diem.

The girls, all except Pen and the two patients, had been assembled in the school-room while the doctor was in the house ; and to them Pen came with the terrible tidings as soon as he had left it.

"My dears, it's small-pox !" cried Pen, coming into the room like a rushing wind, and looking frightened out of her wits ; " Mr. Thorland *says* it is *certainly* small-pox, and he *won't* answer for the consequences !" added Pen, violently emphasizing her words after her usual whimsical fashion.

There was a pause of dead silence, while the frightened girls looked into each other's pale faces with mute dismay. Barbara was the first to break it.

"This comes of the shocking imprudence I protested against, when we first heard there was small-pox in the village. But I was not listened to then. It is *too* bad. It is shameful—it is wicked, that other people's lives should be endangered by such fool-hardiness. I do think it is the most cruel thing I ever heard of," cried Barbara, ghastly pale with alarm, and roused by her fears to a vehemence

and earnestness of manner very unlike her usual languid indifference.

"The two M's are to go to Mrs. Nisbett's. Aunt Frampton has *sent* off a messenger with a *letter* to her the first thing," said Pen, authoritatively.

"Why are we to go?" said Millicent and Margaret together, looking open-eyed at Pen.

"Don't you know," replied Pen, "that it is a *most* contagious disease? And young *people* are the most *sure* to catch it. And then if you *don't* die, you have a *face* like a nutmeg-grater ever after. You two are *too* young to be of *any* use, and are better *out* of the way. Mrs. Nisbett will be sure to *say* that she will be *happy* to receive you, and you had better go and *pack* up your things at once."

"And what about the rest of us, pray? You don't suppose,—nobody can suppose, that we are to remain in the house to catch the horrid, horrid thing and die, or be so disfigured for life that it would have been better to die. It is out of the question," said Barbara, in great agitation.

"But we can't *all* go. The *poor* girls must

have somebody to *attend* upon them. Besides, *where* could you go?" returned Pen, earnestly.

At that moment Miss Pernel slipped out of the room without saying a word.

"I wonder you are not ashamed to talk in that way, Pen. It is *too* bad. It is very wicked of you . . . when it was you, too, who are the cause of this horrible misfortune," rejoined Barbara.

"*I* the *cause* of the small-pox!" said poor Pen, perfectly aghast.

"Yes, to be sure it is you that are the cause of our having it in the house. Didn't I tell you that there ought to have been no communication between the house and the village, as long as the disease lasted?"

"And how was the *house* to be *kept*, I should *like* to know! You are talking *nonsense*, Barbara," said Pen, with an air of superiority.

"Nonsense or not nonsense, I am not going to remain here to catch the beastly thing. Of course the proper person to attend the girls is a nurse, who understands it. What use could I be? There is nothing so foolish and inconsiderate as to go and do mischief by pretending to undertake what you are not fit

for!" said Barbara, with much decision of manner.

"But where can you go to? I am sure I don't know!" reiterated Pen.

"Why, I shall ask Miss Ironside if she will not let me come and stay with her for a little time. They have a spare bedroom, you know!" returned Barbara.

"I have just sent off Jem Tobin with a message to the vicarage, to ask my friend, Miss Awdry to take *me* in! I know very well that it will be a pleasure to her to do so!" said Miss Pernel, who had returned to the room while her sister was speaking.

Barbara turned first red and then pale with anger and disappointment.

"Well, Pernel! I *do* think that is about the slyest and most selfish trick I ever heard of! It is perfectly disgusting! It seems that you, with all your hypocritical talk of duty, have no idea of taking upon yourself the disagreeable task of turning nurse!" said Barbara, with a concentrated sneer.

"I do not see the wisdom or the propriety of tempting Providence by running into danger, which is not in the path of duty. I have no

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talent for nursing, and, to the best of my judgment, it does not lie in the path of my duty to remain here. With regard to my slyness, . . . it would seem to consist in having done what you had the intention of doing!" said Miss Pernel, with grave sententiousness.

"What shall *you* do, Beatrice?" asked Millicent, who was, among all the girls, the special friend and crony of Beatrice.

"I shall stay where I am, and try to be of what use I can," said Beatrice.

"I must say, Beatrice, that I consider that a plain tempting of Providence! It does not lie in your path of duty!" said Miss Pernel.

"I don't know so much about the path of duty as you do, Pernel, but I don't like to leave mamma and the twins, poor things; and I shall remain here!" reiterated Beatrice, with decision.

"And go into the sick room?" asked Margaret, with wide eyes.

"Of course I shall go into the sick room! What is the good of staying here else? I mean to be head nurse!" said Beatrice, firmly.

"But aren't you afraid to catch the disease? Just think what it would be, Beatrice, to be marked all over your face by that horrid thing! It is too dreadful to think of!" returned Margaret.

"One must take one's chance! I'm not afraid! And I mean to stay!" said Beatrice.

"As to taking your chance, people can always be brave who have not much to lose! It would not suit *me* to have *my* face pock-marked all over!" sneered Barbara; "and I shall not stay in the house!" she added, almost fiercely.

"I am sure, for that matter, Beatrice has as much to lose as any of us!" said Millicent, bristling up at the insult offered to her special friend and favourite. "And, Beatrice, dear, if you can get leave for me, I will stay too; I should like to. Indeed, I would rather do so than leave you here all by yourself!" added Millicent, the beauty.

"That would not be right in any way, Milly, dear. People are more likely to catch it at your age than at mine, they say; and mamma would never let you stay. It is all settled that you and Maggie are to go to Mrs.

Nisbett's. I shan't forget that you would have stayed, all the same, Milly!" returned Beatrice.

"Besides, Beatrice will *not* be left by herself; *I* shall be *with* her!" said Miss Pen, who had been looking from one to the other of the speakers.

"I thought you would stay, Pen. You and I will be able to do what is wanted, between us, I have no doubt," said Beatrice.

"Stay! Of course I shall *stay*! It is my *place*! I should like to know *how* the house, or *anything* would go *on*, if I was to go away!" said Miss Pen, with great energy and volubility. "As for the children," she continued, "it is all settled. They will go to *dear, kind*, Mrs. Nisbett's! Beatrice will stay *and* help me! Pernel will go to Miss Ironside, *if* she likes! But I really *don't* see where Barbara is to go! It is *not* I *want* you here, Barbara! You would be no *earthly* use in *any* way. And you are *not* in my position. But I *don't* know where you *can* go to!" urged Miss Pen, quite out of breath with her eagerness and volubility.

"Very much obliged to you, Pen! You

are quite complimentary after your own fashion. I quite agree with you that the matter is a very different one in your case and mine. And as for finding a place of refuge, I have already thought of a very easy way to manage that!" said Barbara, with a superb toss.

"I don't think that there would be any room for you at Mrs. Nisbett's. There is only one spare room besides that occupied by Lady Cartershaw!" said Margaret, with a lively sense of the undesirableness of having Barbara as a sharer of her visit to Mrs. Nisbett's house.

"Hold your tongue, Miss Malapert! Who thought of consulting you upon the subject! I never thought of going to Mrs. Nisbett's; I would not go if she were to ask me! I shall go to the farm at Copleford. I am quite sure that Miss Cornland will be delighted to have me there!" said Barbara.

The other girls looked at each other with different expressions of face, which would have been an amusing study to anybody who knew all the *dessous des cartes*, and the different characters of the girls. Beatrice and Millicent

looked at each other, the former apparently on the brink of bursting out into laughter, and the latter with a dismay that seemed on the point of culminating in tears. Pernel eyed Barbara with a quiet, sly smile; while Pen stared, with open lips, and wide, rounded eyes, at the speaker. There was a moment's pause.

"Why, Barbara! you can't think of such a thing!" cried Pen, who was the first to speak.

"How can it be possible that they should take you in?" said Pernel. "Young Batt makes one more in the family than when they came into the house; and now they have two other guests in the house."

"Pray allow me to manage my own affairs, Pernel, if you please. You managed your own quickly enough, without consulting anybody," said Barbara.

"Besides, I *must* say, Barbara, that with *all* that house full of *young* men, it really does not *seem* to be quite the thing," said Pen, champing and marking her words as she spoke with concentrated energy.

"I flatter myself that I am as good a judge

of what is proper, in every way, and under all circumstances, Pen, as you can be. Miss Jemima Cornland is a most respectable and motherly woman— a *most* respectable woman. I should be really ashamed of myself, if I paid the slightest attention, or attached the smallest importance to such absurd nonsense as you have been talking. I shall write a note to Miss Cornland at once, asking her if she can receive me,” said Barbara, placing herself before her desk as she spoke.

“How could you be such a fool, Maggie, as to suppose that Barbara would think of coming to Mrs. Nisbett’s, where there is nobody but herself and old Lady Cartershaw? As if we did not all know the attraction at the farm,” said poor little Millicent, with a lively recollection of the effect that had been produced on Charles by Barbara’s undeniable attractions.

“You are an impertinent little minx, and I have more than half a mind to box your ears,” retorted Barbara, stung out of her usual sneering coldness. “You are afraid, are you, that ‘the free and happy barley’ may not be queen among all. Why, you poor

little fool, how could you allow yourself to be made such an ass of?"

Despite this little passage of arms, Barbara was engaged in rapidly writing her proposed note to Miss Cornland, which, when completed, she immediately enclosed in an envelop, without allowing any of her sisters to see it. This, however, was what she wrote:—

“MY DEAR MISS CORNLAND,

“I do not doubt that you have already heard the sad misfortune that has fallen upon our family. It is the more terrible in such a family as ours. And poor mamma’s greatest object has been to remove as many as possible of us from the danger of infection. It is at her instance that I write this to ask if your kindness can induce you to receive me under your roof till the danger has passed. You will readily believe, my dear Miss Cornland, that were I to consult only my own inclinations, I should remain here to help dear mamma, and to attend upon my sisters, but I cannot obtain permission to do that. I am very sensible of the greatness of the favour I am asking, and can only say that I venture to

do so only in compliance with the wishes of my parents. I may say, however, on my own account, that should you be able to do us this important service, I do not think that you will find me a troublesome inmate. With kindest regards to all your circle, I am, dear Miss Cornland, always very affectionately yours,

“BARBARA STILWINCHE.”

We may hereafter, perhaps, see something of the feelings which the receipt of this note occasioned at the farm, but for the present it is sufficient to say that the result of it was that before sundown that day Barbara and her “things” had reached the farm, and taken possession of a chamber under Mr. Cornland’s hospitable roof. The two M.’s also had been sent off safely to the house of Mrs. Nisbett, and Pernel had installed herself at the vicarage.

So that when Ben Batt reached the Hall on his mission of inquiry, after parting from his father at Petheram railway station, the only girls remaining in the house beside the two patients were Miss Pen and Beatrice.

CHAPTER X.

DUTY AND BEAUTY.



RS. STILWINCHE was at all times and on all occasions as nearly as possible a cipher in her own house. It seemed to be an accepted fact, admitted on all hands and tacitly assumed by everybody, that she had completed her duty in life by bringing her eight children into the world, and she was thenceforth laid up in ordinary. But if this was habitually the case with her, much more markedly was it so on the occasion of such a calamity as that which had now fallen on the family. She wept and wrung her hands, but it never entered into her own or anybody else's head that she could meddle with any other portion of the cares.

and duties that arose out of the necessities of the case. There were, indeed, circumstances connected with the condition into which the household was thrown by the misfortune that had overtaken it, which it may be shrewdly suspected were by no means unacceptable to Mrs. Stilwinche. There was no more "Pen, my love, it is four minutes after the hour!" from Mr. Stilwinche, standing on the rug with his watch in his hand, waiting to commence reading morning prayers before breakfast. There was no more coming down to take her place at the head of the family at the family dinner hour—everything was disorganised. The whole household devoted its energies to the necessary service of the sick room. Mrs. Stilwinche had her cup of tea brought to her in the morning in her own room, which in truth meant in her bed; and her bit of dinner was served to her on the sofa table in her chamber at whatever hour was most convenient to the servants. It cannot be denied that there was a perceptible approach to the *virginitas* in this mode of life which must have been gratifying to the portly lady.

The position of poor little Mr. Stilwinche was not so pleasant. He seemed to pass his day in continual ghost-like wanderings from his study to the dining-room and back again. This pendulum-like oscillation took him in its course past the foot of the principal staircase, and there he would make a pause each time he passed it, in the hope of intercepting somebody from whom he might ask the latest tidings from the two sick chambers. Nobody ever stopped to reply to his questions at any length,—least of all the servants, who seemed to feel that under the present aspect of things every vestige of authority must be understood to have been taken by the force of things from their so-called master.

Under these circumstances the presence of Mrs. Frampton in the house was truly fortunate. She assumed the post of general-in-chief by that same right divine, which so surely designates the rightful commander in times and circumstances of difficulty and trouble. From the moment when the medical verdict was pronounced Mrs. Frampton assumed the command of the house and of all in it, with that universal assent and submis-

sion which is always yielded to governors, who are really such by right divine. The irresistibleness of the claim thus based was too strong for Miss Pen to offer any opposition to it, though at first she would fain have done so. Miss Pen had in truth some faculties of generalship in her, but her talents in that line were not exactly adapted to a sick room. She was too bustling, too boisterous, too much like a mighty rushing wind. She fell accordingly into the position of second in command under her aunt; and, inasmuch as she had not the least idea of sparing herself either risk or labour, was, under the conditions, very useful. And Pen it was who, during the whole course of the illness of her sisters, performed the duty of raising, moving, and turning the suffering patients in their beds, for Pen's vigorous development and strength of arm made her invaluable for the performance of this necessary service.

It was getting dusk, and all the four girls who were to leave the house had gone to their several destinations; the medical man had made his second visit, and had departed, telling Mrs. Frampton that the malady was

clearly enough small-pox, that it must follow its normal course, and that for the present it was impossible to form the remotest judgment as to the probability of the result ; two hired nurses had arrived, and had been installed in the two sick rooms, when Mrs. Frampton, Pen, and Beatrice met in the housekeeper's room to eat a bit of food in the absence of any formal dinner, before entering upon their night watches.

"Of course," Mrs. Frampton was saying in continuation of the conversation which had been passing between them, "of course it was my duty to send out of the house the girls who are not of age to judge for themselves, and whose duty it is to do as they are ordered. With regard to all the rest of you, you can but each of you be guided by your own feelings on the subject. I do not feel that I have any right to blame those who have thought fit to take themselves out of harm's way ; and still less to make any objection to your resolution to remain, my dears. You know the risk you run ; and you are old enough to know your own minds as to braving it."

"I am not afraid, aunt. I don't feel as if it was at all likely that I should catch the disease. Many people do not, you know," said Beatrice.

"That is talking nonsense, my dear. If you have no better reason for staying here than because you fancy that that will not happen to you which we know happens to other people, I think it would have been better that you should have left the house like your sisters. I would not have you stop here and take part in nursing your sisters without being fully aware of the risk you run in doing so. It is no good—it is not at all wise to conceal from yourself the fact that it is exceedingly probable that you may take the disease—that the disease is a very dangerous one, and that if those who suffer from it escape with their lives, it is far more probable than not that they may be disfigured by the marks of it for the rest of their days. Pray do not delude yourself, Beatrice, my dear, with any fancy that this risk is less for you than for anyone else. You must look the matter fairly in the face, and take your course with a full knowledge of the facts of the case. It is not

at all too late for you to avoid the danger. It is not necessary even that you should leave the house like your sisters. You can live here without ever coming into communication with the sick room. Your sisters will be sufficiently nursed without your aid. I shall be here, and with the help of the hired nurses I should get on very well. I do not think that anybody would blame you for deciding to avoid the danger."

Mrs. Frampton spoke at length and earnestly. She felt that she had to deliver her soul upon this matter; and she was determined that if either of her neices chose to share the duties of the sick room, they should not do so in any ignorance of the real nature of the risk they ran.

"I only meant, aunt, that I don't feel nervous about catching the disease. They say that to feel nervous about it is the surest way to catch it. Of course I know that one may catch it, and what the consequences of catching it may be. But I can't make up my mind to be any where else but with my sisters in this danger. I prefer to stay, if you please, aunt, and hope to make myself useful."

"Very well, my dear. So be it. So that you know the cost of your tower before you set about building it, well and good. I should not have blamed you for going, but . . . I shan't forget your staying. And you Pen," said Mrs. Frampton, turning to her eldest neice.

"Well, aunt, I think about Beatrice's staying just as you do," said Pen.

"But what about yourself? Have you fully made up your mind to stay and take your chance of what may happen to you?"

"*Me!* Oh, I did not think *about* it! of *course* I must stay! How *would* the house go on *without* me? It would be impossible," said Pen with even greater intensity of emphasis than that which always characterized her ordinary conversation.

"I don't quite see that, Pen," said her aunt with a queer twinkle in her eye. "If you felt that you would rather not expose yourself to the danger, which you must unquestionably be exposed to here, I don't see why it should be so impossible for me to take your place as house-keeper for a short time. I *have* managed a house before now."

“But you *don't* know *what* cook is. *Nobody* can manage *her* but me. And James too. He *never* minds *any* one but me. And the dairy-woman. Why there *wouldn't* be a *fresh* egg to be had in the house. And besides,” continued Pen after a slight pause in her breathless description of the cataclysm which would assuredly follow her absence from her post, “*after* all why should *you* stay and *expose* yourself to the disease, aunt?”

“The bedside in sickness is an old woman's proper place. We should all be strangled by act of parliament, and a very useful measure too, if we were not kept alive to be useful in times of sickness. If I should take the disease, which is very unlikely, and get marked, it won't spoil *my* beauty. No, I shall nurse my neices through it you may depend. But I see no reason for you to stay unless you choose to do so,” said Mrs. Frampton.

“I am *sure* it is very *good* of you to stand by us, aunt,” rejoined Pen stoutly, “but I *should* not think of *leaving* you. It is my *place* to be here, and *here* I shall be. A pretty *holiday* it would be for cook, and *all* the rest of them if *I* were to go away. And

the *poor* girls too, I am *sure* they would want *me*. And I *shouldn't* be easy one minute in my *mind* if I was away. It is quite *out* of the question !”

“Very well, my dear. So be it. You and I and Beatrice will share the work between us. I was only anxious that you should fully know”

Here Mrs. Frampton was interrupted by the entrance of James, who came to say that young Mr. Batt was below, and wanted to know if he could speak to any one of the young ladies for a minute. The ladies looked at each other, and a bright blush came into the cheeks of Beatrice.

“It is to ask for news of our invalids for our friends at the farm, no doubt. I suppose he had better come up here for a minute. He must not repeat such visits though. For we frequenters of the sick rooms must henceforward consider ourselves in quarantine,” said Mrs. Frampton.

So the servant was desired to ask Mr. Batt to walk up.

Ben made his appearance accordingly ; and Mrs. Frampton could not avoid being struck

by the expression of strong and real anxiety in his face, as he said that despite his fear of intruding at such a moment, he had not been able to refrain from coming to learn more accurately than from the mere report of servants what was the condition of the young ladies who had been taken ill.

"The doctor's opinion is not a comfortable one at all. Of the nature of the attack there is no doubt whatever ; and he sees reason to fear that the malady may develop itself in a severe form. It must, however, be some days yet before an opinion of any value can be formed as to the upshot. God grant it may be favourable. It is very kind of you, young sir, to have come on the errand you have. But for the future I am afraid that any intercourse between us who are in attendance in the sick chamber and our friends must be suspended."

"I have not the smallest fear of infection, ma'am. I never catch anything," said Ben.

"But others may not have the same immunity. I was just saying to these young ladies, when you came in, that we must henceforward consider ourselves in quaran-

tine," said Mrs. Frampton. "Please thank Miss Cornland very cordially from us for her kind inquiries, and for her great kindness in receiving beneath her roof Miss Barbara Stillwinche whom, I suppose, you left at Copleford," added Mrs. Frampton, unmistakably dismissing her visitor.

Ben got up to go, and as he did so his eyes met those of Beatrice, and expressed so eloquently and urgently an eager petition, which he did not venture to put into words, that Beatrice said: "Do not ring, aunt; the servants are all busy with more than they have time to do; and I heard James go up stairs this minute with mamma's dinner. I will go with Mr. Batt to the door."

"I knew how it would be, Beatrice," said Ben as soon as ever he had shut the door of the room behind him. "I was sure you would be the one to run into danger! Just think what I shall feel till it is over!"

"I'm sure at least I flatter myself, that you would not have me do otherwise. Tell the truth, Ben," said Beatrice, stopping in the passage on her way to the door of the house, and laying her rather brown but exqui-

sitely small and pretty hand on his coat-sleeve "Tell me whether you would have rather that I should have run away?"

"No, I wouldn't. Of course I knew that you would *not* run away. If you were one to run away in such a case I should never have cared about the matter so much as I do. Beatrice, I love you a thousand times better for doing as you are doing!—but I don't like it a bit the better for all that."

"*Do* you love me better than you would if I had asked Miss Cornland to take me in, instead of staying here to nurse my sisters?—if I had managed so as to come and live for several days in the same house where a certain other person is living, so that there might have been any number of hours of talking together, or reading together, or walking together?" said Beatrice, with her hand in his, and hanging her pretty little round-shaped head, so that he looked down upon all its rippling wealth of brown ringlets . . . "do you, really and truly?"

"It would have been very nice at the farm! Ah! but I do love you a thousand times better, my own dear, brave girl really

and truly. But *may* I say what I have dared to say?—*may* I say ‘my own?’”

“It is the first time—perhaps it may be the last—but it is true,” said Beatrice, still hanging her head, and in a scarcely audible whisper.

It certainly was not the last time; for Ben caught her in his arms, and, as he clasped her to his breast, murmured in her ear, “My own!—my own!—my own for ever! But oh, Beatrice, don’t speak of the possibility of its being the last time.”

“It may be. You know we can’t shut our eyes to the chances that it may be but I do not think it. I am not afraid,” she added after a pause, raising her head and shaking back its curls as she looked him with steady eyes in the face.

“God grant, my best and dearest, that all may go well with you and yours!” ejaculated Ben, fervently.

“But suppose,” said Beatrice, again dropping her eyes and bending her face towards the ground “suppose that when we meet again I should be as many people are who recover from this dreadful disease?”


Ben, whose arm during the last few sentences had not relinquished its position around her waist, clasped her to his side so suddenly and so vigorously as almost to press the breath out of her body, as he said, "Try it, darling, and see! See whether I would love you as dearly as man ever loved a woman! No! God forbid that you should try it! The loss of that sweet face, that you hold down out of my sight as pertinaciously as if the beauty had gone out of it, would be a loss to break my heart; but I should love you, my Beatrice, no less," he said, speaking the last words with grave seriousness.

"Should you, Ben? Should you? Then indeed I too may say, 'My own!—my own!'" and she raised her face as she spoke to his, and suffered him to press one long, long kiss on her lips.

"Now you must go to your anxiety, and I must go to my work! Please God, we shall meet again soon in health and happiness and not too unlike our present selves," said Beatrice, turning from him as she spoke, and escaping into the house.

CHAPTER XI.

UNDER THE PORCH AMID THE ROSES.

T was just beginning to be dusk when Ben turned from the door of the Hall on his walk across the park to the farm ; but a moon, nearly at its full, was rising over the clump of trees behind the spire of the church at the further side of the park, and would have made the walk a lovely one to anybody whose mind and thoughts were in a fit state to appreciate the beauty of it ; but such was not Ben's case. He walked as one having eyes and not seeing, meditating many things. The wooing on which he had entered with the conscious and well-ascertained purpose of wooing and winning had prospered, and the object of his

wooing was fairly won. He was, in truth as thoroughly in love as the most impulsive and unreasoning love-at-first-sight lover, with whose passion reasoned admiration has no more to do than the tides have, could ever be. The water into which one deliberately walks is not at all necessarily the shallowest. And Ben was conscious, to the inmost core of his heart, of the boundless and delicious triumph of a man who has just received the first avowal of a love that answers to his own. The joy and the elation were irrepressible, and yet there was so much to dash the joy with trembling fear, and a dread unspeakable. If the next time he were to look on the bright face, every line and expression of which was so indelibly imprinted on his mind, it should show no longer the features so dear, so far, to his thinking, the brightest, best, and loveliest he had ever looked on. If he should meet a face he could hardly recognise! Ben well knew — probably, indeed, overrated — the amount of the chances that this might be so. He had no fear that he should find himself unable to redeem the pledge he had so eagerly given a few minutes ago. He knew that he

should love his bonny, brave Beatrice as dearly as ever; but . . . the peril was a tremendous one, and he would readily have given one of his own limbs to be lopped from his body to ensure escape from it; but then the still worse danger of losing his darling altogether pushed itself into the foreground of his mind, and he felt as if he would have been glad to compound for the lesser calamity of the two.

Thinking of all these things—of his admiration for the high sense of duty and courage, which had led his darling into the danger that it was tormenting him to contemplate, of the horror of the misfortunes which might be the cost of the heroism he loved—Ben was not in a humour to look very pleasantly on the sight that met his eyes under the farm-house porch, as he stepped up to it at the end of his walk. Yet the sight—looked at as an artist might have looked at it—was a pretty one enough.

On the seat of the porch, embowered in its masses of creeping roses and eglantines, into which the capricious, uncertain, silver light of the moon, now nearly half way in her journey

up the sky, was just beginning to peer, there sat Barbara Stilwinche and Charles Cornland. A more charming looking pair for a picture of lovers under the moonlight could not well be conceived ; nor an *entourage* more picturesque and poetical.

Barbara, despite all that might be said by cold-blooded critics, who must needs pry into the secrets that physiognomy whispers to those who understand her language, was, as has been said, exceedingly pretty—exceedingly attractive, both in face and figure. And she was, as always, faultlessly dressed, from the black velvet circlet around her slender white throat, to the pretty kid slipper on her charmingly shaped foot, in such a fashion as to enhance to the uttermost every perfection of her person. Charles was a very handsome fellow, looking not less so than usual in the excitement of the moment ; and he, too, on hearing, when he came home in the evening, of the new guest who had come to his father's house, had hastened to do his best to render himself acceptable in the beauty's eyes. The situation spoke for itself. Very evidently they had come there for the purpose of having

a desperate flirtation, and were enjoying the golden opportunity to the utmost.

Of course an hour so spent must be exquisitely delightful. It is generally supposed that it must be especially so to the happy swain. And yet, on this occasion, it may be assumed that the lady was the better contented and the happier of the two. Each perfectly well knew that they were doing what they ought not to have been doing; and each knew perfectly well that the other knew it. Charles had not forgotten that he had said words to Millicent which ought to have made it impossible for him to be engaged as he now was engaged. He knew that it would stab to the core that gentle little heart, which had given itself to his asking for it, could she have seen him as he sat there with her dangerous sister. And, in truth, at the bottom of his heart he would far rather have at that instant turned his back on the pretty creature at his side, never to look on her again, than inflict that stab. He had by this time learned pretty accurately the nature and the worth of the elegant Barbara's blandishments; and knew that in wronging his little Millicent he

was turning from the gold to the pinchbeck. But the gold was not there, and the pinchbeck was. And Barbara chose that he should make love to her. And he knew very well, when he heard that she was in the house, that he would be expected and called upon to do so. And it must be admitted that at twenty,—ay, or at fifty—it is an extremely difficult thing to be recalcitrant to such requisitions. As for the lady, she knew of course that what she was doing would go far towards breaking her sister's heart, if she only knew it; and that she was destroying her future prospect of happiness in exact proportion to the measure of success she could achieve in the work she was engaged on. It may be doubted, indeed, whether any consideration of these facts had any influence whatever in making the moments that were passing less sweet to Miss Barbara. Barbara was not incontestably the beauty of the family, only because of the very remarkable personal attractions of her sister Millicent. And this was an abundantly sufficient reason to make Barbara hate her rival with a hatred which would have absolutely excluded pity for any kind or amount of suffering that

might arise to Millicent from finding herself distanced, vanquished, and extinguished by the triumph of her own attractions. She had the pleasure in what she was doing, which every man, woman, and child is conscious of, from doing that which they are especially capable of and adapted for doing well. But it was hushed by the haunting suspicion, reaching nearly to conviction, that, let her do her spiriting as deftly as she might, she was not achieving such success as she could have wished. Barbara Stilwinche was, in the ordinary and cant sense of the term, a perfectly well brought up young lady. And it was very far from her intention to act in any way in such sort as to overstep the bounds of maidenly modesty. Her temperament, habit, and that prudence, which usually goes by the name of, and does duty for, principle, all combined to secure her from any such danger. But the fatal determination to succeed in the effort she was making, the terrible necessity of having recourse to stronger measures, when more moderate ones seemed to fail to produce the desired effect, joined to the incapacity natural to a low mind, of conceiving that what

she wanted was to be attained by no sort of angling for it save one, spurred her to venture on temerities, which she certainly did not contemplate when she buckled on her armour for the struggle. It is the Nemesis—or rather one of the forms in which is wont to appear the Nemesis—of the unquenchable thirst for admiration.

But Barbara, play the Circe as she might, felt that she was not succeeding in such measure as the admirable felicity of the opportunity might well have entitled her to hope. What could be amiss? Was the powder damp? Was there no cap on the nipple? Was the lock out of order? Why the deuce did not the shot go home to its mark? Impossible that he should be insensible to the eloquence of the appealing blue eyes, that looked up into his from such a position that it seemed impossible but that his lips must follow the magnet held in such propinquity to them! How could he avoid making the declarations and protestations so carefully and skillfully prepared for him and put into his mouth, as it were, by her half-expressed invitations and confessions.

Yet the lips did not follow the magnet, and the declarations and protestations were not made; for Charles was, in truth, very genuinely in love with little Millicent, "the queen among them all." And if Barbara could by any possibility have guessed how nearly the feeling of Charles came to hatred for her, as he sat there beside her submitting to her love-making, she would assuredly have experienced such a shock of astonishment as she had never yet known. He hated her for tempting him, and compelling him by witcheries, which he was not strong enough entirely to resist, to do what he hated himself for doing, and to feel what he hated himself for feeling. The fact was that Charles was not weak enough to ensure his falling a victim to Barbara's wiles, and not strong enough to enable him to turn his back on them. Nor could it be maintained that it would have been the same thing with him, had it been a girl of less personal attractions, who had attempted to play the same game with him. He was very sensible to all the charms of face and person. He was not insensible to, though he perhaps was not wholly the dupe of, her quite sufficiently

strongly expressed admiration of himself. In a certain way it was agreeable to him to be made love to by so pretty a girl, and to make love to her in return. But he soon became alarmed by the slippery nature of the inclined plane upon which he found himself. He was sufficiently true to Millicent to have not the smallest idea of giving her up for the sake of Barbara. But he was not sufficiently true to her to have abstained from any amount of toying with Barbara, if only he could be assured that it could be done "without prejudice."

This being the state of the case, Charles was not altogether displeased by the appearance of Ben at the entrance of the porch. He felt, it is true, a sort of sense of being caught and detected, which to a certain degree, disposed him to feel angry with the interloper, though at the same time by no means sorry that the *tête-à-tête* with his charming companion was interrupted. As for Barbara, she could have strangled Ben where he stood with her own fair fingers with all the pleasure in life.

Ben, for his part, felt inclined to be not

a little angry with his friend Charles. He was the first to speak.

"There is nothing so unpleasant as to be an unintentional intruder," he said, bowing to Miss Barbara as he spoke; "and my only excuse is, that this is the front door . . . and that I had no idea of finding any one here."

"I don't know what you mean by intrusion. The porch is free to any one, I suppose," said Charles, somewhat surlily.

"I suppose Mr. Batt has yielded to exactly the same temptation that brought us out here—to look at this magnificent moonlight?" said Barbara, speaking without any trace of embarrassment.

"No; I've seen the moon before. I thought I would go up to the Hall to inquire after the young ladies, and I saw something there very different from what there is to be seen here," said Ben.

"What do you mean? What was it you saw at the Hall?" said Charles.

"Well, as for the moonlight, that might be seen there the same as here; but what I saw there, that I don't see here, was a high-spirited, brave-hearted girl, who cares for others more

THE STILWINCHES OF COMBE MAVIS.

and you had better steer clear of her, friend Charles."

And so saying, Ben turned to go into the house, and Charles, asking what news he had brought from the Hall, followed him.

CHAPTER XII.

“ A FELLOW CAN'T, YOU KNOW ! ”



OR some days the principal interest in the lives of the party assembled in Mr. Cornland's house at Coppleford, and, indeed, at Combe Mavis generally, turned on the morning and evening bulletins from the Hall of the progress of the two patients there. The letter which Mr. Batt expected from his old friend, Mr. Sylvester, had not arrived as quickly as had been expected. A short note only had come from the old lawyer, saying that the temporary absence from home of his correspondent in the Isle of Man would cause some little delay in obtaining the desired documents, and that he would not fail to forward them as

soon as he could get them, which he hoped to do in a few days.

Miss Barbara, notwithstanding the words she had spoken in her wrath as she flounced out of the porch in the manner narrated in the last chapter, did not take any steps to place herself more specially under the guardianship of Miss Jemima Cornland, or to bring in any way her complaint of Ben's misconduct under that lady's notice. A very short period of reflection, probably, was needed to suggest to the angry young lady that, upon the whole, the least said was the soonest mended on that subject; but it did not by any means follow that peace was made between her and her enemy. The condition between them was one of declared hostility, though the warfare was carried on only by occasional thrusts and stabs, and by a system of mutual watching.

One morning, Charles succeeded in persuading Mr. Batt to walk over with him to the house of Mrs. Nisbett, so that the ostensible motive for the visit might be a call by Mr. Batt on his old acquaintance, Lady Cartershaw, while the real purpose was an inter-

view between Charles and Millicent. The visitors found the two M's, as the younger girls, Margaret and Millicent, were called in the family at the Hall, in the morning room, and some minutes elapsed before Mrs. Nisbett and her sister came down to receive their visitors.

Charles and Millicent of course seized this opportunity for an eager lovers' talk, in the seclusion of the bow window of the large room, while Mr. Batt naturally fell into conversation with Margaret, near the fire. The poor girl was looking wretchedly ill—was very evidently, breaking her heart, as it is called ; and Mr. Batt, who was much struck by her sad appearance, and evident misery, would have given much to bring her some consolation, if he had only known how to set about it. If he could only have said to her, "Yes, yes ! I know all about it ! You are breaking your poor little heart, because they won't let you marry the young fellow over there at Whitton. But pluck up your courage ! Don't be down-hearted ! There's a little bird that tells me, that it will all come right !" But it was impossible for Mr. Batt to say this.

And it was impossible for poor little Maggie to confide her sorrows to him. Still, he strove, in his simple fashion, to do the best he could.

“Ah!” said he, smiling and winking, as he indicated, with a jerk of his head, Charles and Millicent standing in the window. “It’s always the same thing; the lads will be running after the lasses! And, Lord bless ye! where’s the good of us old ’uns trying to interfere and meddle with it. Not the least good in the world. Bless your heart, the young ’uns always beat us at it, always! Let the old ’uns make what difficulties they may, the young ’uns have nothing to do but to hold on, and hold fast, and be true to each other, and they must have it their own way. I never knew it otherwise.”

“Do you think so, Mr. Batt?” said little Margaret, with a faint attempt at a pale smile, and in a voice which was intended to match the smile, but which, in reality, was a little quavering twitter, which seemed more like the prelude to a fit of tears.

“Why, to be sure I do; it stands to reason! I’ve known a many cases in my time.

I'm an elderly man, miss, and I've seen a deal of life, I have. And I've never known it otherwise. If the lad is true to the lass, and the lass is true to him, they're sure to have it their own way."

"But I am afraid, Mr. Batt, that your ideas upon the subject would hardly be approved of by parents. What about the authority of parents? You would not have young persons fly in the face of their fathers and mothers?" returned Maggie, still attempting the tone of cheerful *persiflage*, but in truth, interested not a little by the nature of Mr. Batt's opinions and predictions.

"Certainly not, miss; by no means! I am a father myself! I don't say parents should be disobeyed. But, Lord bless you, they always come round. They have to. I've known young people in my time, who were fond of each other, and were just breaking their hearts because it didn't all go quite smooth right away at once. And I always said to 'em, Hold on! Have patience! Be true to each other! and it'll all come right! And you may take my word for it, Miss Margaret, it always did, and it always

will!" said Mr. Batt, speaking very emphatically.

And then the old ladies made their appearance in the drawing-room, and Charles had to leave his *tête-à-tête* in the bow-window, and come forward to be presented to Lady Cartershaw, and Mr. Batt had to talk with her and her sister for the few minutes necessary to constitute the supposed motive for a morning call. Naturally, the talk turned principally on the medical reports from the hall. And all parties were obliged to admit that they were very far from satisfactory. There was no denying that the girls were in great danger; and it could only be hoped that youth and unimpaired constitutions, and good nursing, would bring them through.

"You were in luck, Charlie; you didn't have your walk for your pains, anyhow. Well, I wish you joy of your choice. She is as pretty a girl as a fellow could wish to set eyes on. A regular sweet face. That Miss Margaret, poor thing, is pretty, but Miss Milly is the flower of the flock, and no mistake."

"Yes, I think she is," said Charles, with a certain air of fatuity; "and as good as she is pretty, and very clever too," he added, in a more sober tone.

"And best of all, I suppose, she likes you," said Mr. Batt, with the least flavour in the world of banter in his tone.

"Well, I flatter myself she does a little," said Charles, returning to his tone of successful lady-killer.

"Ah, you mean, *not* a little," said Mr. Batt.

"Well, *not* a little, if you like to say so. I own I think she is fond of me," said Charles, with a conquering hero tone.

"And, I suppose, you like her?" said Mr. Batt.

"I should think I did, too! Of course I do! Who couldn't that is, if he was in my place?" said Charles.

"Well then, what the devil do you mean by going on in the way you do with that Miss Barbara?" said Mr. Batt, turning suddenly on him, in an altered tone.

"Going on! What do I do? How can I help it? If a girl will run after a fellow the way she does, what can a fellow do? Would

you have me refuse to speak to her?" said Charles, somewhat nettled at Mr. Batt's attack, yet evidently well pleased at the idea of the *rôle* thus attributed to him.

"No, you can't refuse to speak to her . . . in your own father's house. But there's no need to be getting into holes and corners with her, in the way you do. You may depend upon it, no good can come of it. *She* knows very well what she is up to. And the first thing she wants is to make mischief between you and her sister. I wonder you don't see it?" said Mr. Batt.

"Pooh! . . . Mischief between me and Milly! I should like to see her do it. Not she. I flatter myself my little Milly likes me a little too well, for any fear of that," returned Charles.

"Well, would you like that she should see all that goes on between you and that Barbara? I don't ask you to tell me; but ask yourself the question, and let your own heart answer it truly. And, mind you, my notion is, that if you love that pretty creature you were talking to just now, and are persuaded that she loves you, it is not the part of a man, and

an honest good fellow, to be doing what you know would vex her if she saw it. That's all. And as for that Barbara, you know she is a bad 'un, as well as I do," said Mr. Batt.

"But what can I do?" repeated Charles, a little crest-fallen. "You can see for yourself that she won't let me alone. I am sure I don't want to flirt with her."

"Well, I think I could contrive, if I were in your place, to make her understand as much. Can you say, now, that you don't flirt with her when she invites you to it? Ask yourself; and ask yourself whether it's fair to that innocent-hearted little girl we left at the house there;—not to mention the imprudence of it, for she is one of the sort that would stick at nothing to make mischief," urged Mr. Batt.

"I wish she had never come to the farm," grumbled Charles.

"She came on purpose to see if she could, 'by hook or by crook, make a break between you and her sister. Lord! I am up to the ways of them! But I'd be shot if she should make a fool of me, if I were in your place," said Batt.

"She's not going to make a fool of me!" said Charles, rather sulkily.

"If you give her her head she will; you see if she don't."

"What would you have me do, then?" returned Charles.

"Well, if you want to behave as a man should behave, that wants to act like a man, and deserves to be trusted with the happiness of a pretty girl, just tell her you've no time to waste, and walk yourself off the next time she manages to catch you alone."

"I think I will. It would be rather a strong measure for a fellow to take, you know, but I think I will do it. A fellow can't be expected to make love to every girl that may happen to take a fancy to him, can he?" said Charles, with a Don Juan air.

"Well, I was never much exposed to that sort of thing myself, but I should say certainly not," replied Mr. Batt, looking into his companion's face, with a funny twinkle in his eye, that Charles did not above half like the look of.

Ben had declined accompanying his father and Charles in their walk, saying that he was

going up to the hall in quest of news. He had never seen either of the ladies there since the date of the visit which has been recorded, but he had been up to the house at least twice every day, and often more frequently. In fact, he spent a large number of his hours in hanging about the place, endeavouring to waylay the doctor as he came from his visits, or to come to speech with any one of the servants from whom it was possible to obtain any details of the news from the sick room. And latterly his father had seemed almost as much interested in these inquiries as Ben himself was.

As Charles and Mr. Batt approached the farm on their return from Mrs. Nisbett's they met Ben leaving the house.

"What news did you get at the hall, Ben?" said his father.

"I couldn't get to see the doctor; I waited more than an hour for him to come out, and was obliged to come away without seeing him. The gardener said that from all he could hear things were not looking any better this morning. I am very much afraid" said Ben, shaking his head sadly.

"Was the doctor all that time in the house?" asked his father.

"Yes; and I thought that looked bad. He isn't generally nearly so long there. Don't you think that looks fishy, eh, father?" said Ben, looking anxiously into his father's face.

"I am afraid it does, Ben; I don't like the look of it a bit," said Mr. Batt, returning his son's anxious look.

"I was going up there again now; I must find out what the doctor said. The servants are sure to know that," said Ben.

"Tell ye what, Ben, suppose we were to pull foot over to Petheram, and see the doctor himself; that would be more to the purpose. I ain't afraid of the walk, if you are not," said his father.

"I! not a bit, I should like it. Yes, it would be far more satisfactory to get a word with the doctor himself," acquiesced Ben.

"Come along, then. Tell your father, Charles, where we are off to, and what for. We won't be later than we can help; and I dare say somebody won't mind sitting up to let us in," said Mr. Batt.

"I'll do that, and don't hurry yourselves.

I shan't mind half an hour, more or less, the least in the world . . . that is," added Charles, suddenly checking himself, . . . "unless a certain lady should propose to sit up with me, you know."

"Oh, don't run into danger, pray, on our behalf," said Mr. Batt, with a sly wink at his son. "If that should be the case," he added, "the best way would be to leave her to open the door for us herself."

"If I did that I think you would be likely to stay on the outside. Anyway, there shall be somebody to let you in. I hope you will get good news, with all my heart. But you could see the doctor, most likely, at the hall to-morrow," said Charles.

"Ah, but I want to hear to-night," said Ben.

"And so do I," added his father.

And with that, the two Bens, father and son, started off at a good pace on their walk to Petheram.

"Of course you know what Master Charles meant just now about a certain lady?" said Mr. Batt, when they had walked a few minutes in silence.

"Yes, I know what he meant, but I was surprised at his saying it all the same," replied Ben.

"That was because I had been giving him a bit of my mind as to the way he and Miss Barbara go on together. It is too bad! and he engaged, or as good as engaged, to that sweet-looking little Milly. It was plain to see she is as much in love with him as a girl can be when we went to-day," said Mr. Batt.

"And he is in love with her, fast enough," said Ben.

"What does he go on for like that with that nasty girl at the farm, then, I should like to know?" said the elder Batt, indignantly.

"What for?—because he is soft. . . . Partly, too, because he likes being run after by a pretty girl—it flatters his vanity, and my friend Charles has a fair dose of vanity. But he don't mean any harm. And I suspect Miss Barbara knows right well that he don't care a straw for her," replied Ben.

"That's all very well, but there's often a deal of mischief done that way. He won't hurt that Barbara by his flirting like enough, but he may hurt the other. I've no

patience with a fellow who risks giving pain to the girl he loves, merely to gratify his own vanity," said Mr. Batt, with considerable disgust.

"I shall pitch it into him in those very words. That'll make him wince a bit. I don't think he means amiss," said Ben.

"Well, do; you'll do him a service I saw that other poor girl at Mrs. Nisbett's What's her name? Maggie! She looked as if she was breaking her heart, poor thing!" said Mr. Batt.

"Ah, poor girl! I'm afraid that's a bad job. His mother won't have it; and he's not the fellow to face the world with a wife and without a penny Though I believe he is ready to try it. He is a trump, he is! But of course the girl's parents won't let her do that," said his son.

"Oh! they won't, won't they? But I thought I had heard something about another of the sisters accepting a young man who talked of making his own way in the world?" said his father in a sly tone.

"Yes, you did," said Ben, who coloured up to the roots of his hair for a moment, but in the

next seemed to have quite recovered himself, and spoke without any embarrassment. "Yes, you did; but that is quite a different case. In the first place, I take it I could do very many things that Augustus Fitzwilliam could not. He is likely to be better at most things than at getting his living. In the next place, Beatrice has got a small matter of her own, but Maggie has nothing. And in the third place, and most important of all, Beatrice is of age, and need not ask leave of anybody."

"Well, I won't gainsay a bit of all that. But what I was going to say was, that . . . but you mustn't say a word about it yet to a soul, mind you . . . I have a notion that it may not be very difficult to induce the young man's mother to change her mind, and consent to her son's marriage with Miss Margaret—aye, and come down handsomely with a provision for them," said Mr. Batt.

"You don't say so! But who is it that you think could bring the old lady to see the error of her ways?" said his son.

"Ben Batt, the elder. I meant to try my hand on her; and I should have done it

before now if it hadn't been for this unlucky illness at the hall," returned his father.

"Well, I always thought that you could do more things, father, than anybody else I ever knew, but . . . I did not know that you were such a hand at coming round an old lady," said Ben.

"We shall see. But, mind you, I don't say that I could do as much with every old lady. We shall see. Anyway, don't you say a syllable to anybody—d'ye hear?"

"All right—mum's the word," said Ben.

And then, during the rest of their walk, the elder man led his son to talk of his late companions, the two young Cornlands, and set himself to learn as much as he could of the different characters of the two boys without asking any special or direct questions upon the subject.

It had been dark some time before they arrived at Petheram; but they were fortunate enough to find the object of their visit at home.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN GREAT DANGER.



R. GRANGER, who held the local complimentary rank of "Doctor," was an important personage at Petherham. He had many years since relinquished the position of parish doctor to a younger man, and was understood not to be at all anxious to increase his practice. He was the most active and useful member of the Petheram Corporation, and a governor of the hospital. It was further understood, that the many years of assiduous labour during which Petheram had known him as an active medical practitioner had resulted in feathering the doctor's nest pretty comfortably ; besides which, he had, at the outset of his career, married a lady with a good bit of money.

It will be readily understood that the combined result of all these circumstances was, that "Dr. Grainger" was one of the most highly-respected inhabitants of the little town, and that his "practice" was now almost entirely restricted to a few of his old cronies of the town, and the county families, whom he had been in the habit of attending for years. There was not one of the Stillwinche girls at whose first introduction into this world he had not presided; and probably, if the roll of them had been continued by a yearly addition down to the present time, he would have done for the juniors of the family what he had done for their predecessors, although the comfortable doctor had long since "declined that branch of the profession;" and upon the present unpleasant occasion he would far rather have left his two old acquaintances, Faith and Charity Stillwinche, to be attended by a younger man, had he consulted nothing but his own inclination. But he could not do that for many reasons, among which, perhaps, not the least was the consideration that if the case were attended by Mr. Jackson, the young general practitioner at Petheram, the very

unpleasantly long bill which would infallibly be sent to the hall at Christmas must be paid with reasonable promptitude ; whereas, if his old friend, Stilwinche, "poor fellow," left his, Grainger's, bill unpaid for a twelvemonth, or any number of twelvemonths, it would not signify much. So Dr. Grainger, when summoned, had not hesitated to accept a case which would certainly require him to ride over to Combe Mavis at least twice a day for many a day to come, and was in every way an unpleasant one.

Mr. Batt and his son were shown by the doctor's servant into a now nearly disused room, which had once been, and was still called his consulting room ; and in a minute or two the doctor bustled in, evidently in a great hurry, with a " Well, my man, what can I do for you ?" uttered almost before his eyes had had time to light on his visitors. He was a tall, handsome, florid man, with silver hair, and wore an evening dress, with black shorts and silk stockings, displaying a remarkably well-formed leg.

" Nothing, doctor, in the way of physick for me, or for my son here, thank you," said Ben,

the elder ; " we have called over from Coppleford to inquire after the young ladies at Combe Hall."

" Oh ! Ah ! Combe Hall ! Just so ! I thought you didn't look, either of you, as if you had any business with one of my trade. But Coppleford, . . . that's Cornland's farm, the new tenant. Is your name Cornland, may I ask ?" said the doctor, looking with somewhat of curiosity at his visitors.

" No, doctor, my name is Benjamin Batt, at your service—son's name the same. We are staying at Coppleford. Charles Cornland is an old friend of mine. We have made acquaintance with the ladies at the hall, and are anxious to hear from you how they are getting on

" Whether there is any danger ?" added Ben, the younger, in a tone that unmistakably told the doctor's quick ear the anxiety with which his reply was waited for. -

" May I ask," said Mr. Granger, looking from one to the other of his visitors ; " if I am speaking to a any a connections of the family ? not that," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders ; " in a

case of this kind, the nature of which is known to all the country, there can be any question of secrecy."

"I can't say that I have the honor of being more than a friend, and, indeed, a friend of very recent date, but"

"I have known the family for a longer time than my father has," interrupted Ben, "and I assure you, sir, that I we, that is, have an interest in which"

"We have made constant enquiries in the ordinary way," put in his father, interrupting in his turn; "but the answers one gets from servants are so unsatisfactory, that we thought there would be no impropriety in coming to you, to ascertain the real state of the case."

If young Ben's speech had been none of the clearest, the expression of face which accompanied it, had been sufficient to make the nature of the young gentleman's interest in the sufferers at the hall, very sufficiently evident to the perceptions of the shrewd doctor, save that he imagined that one of his two especial patients was the particular object of Ben's interest.

"Just so; I can have no objection, my

dear sir, to telling you the exact state of the case ; and I wish with all my heart that I could give you a more cheering account than it is in my power to do. Frankly, I have nothing good to say ;" and the doctor finished his sentence by pursing up his lips and shaking his head gravely.

"Do you mean that there is real danger to life, doctor?" said Mr. Batt, looking with a grave glance into the doctor's eyes.

"My dear sir, I hold, that if it may sometimes be necessary on medical grounds to conceal from a patient his or her true condition, there can be no excuse for withholding the truth from their friends, more especially when the enquirers are not likely to come in contact with the sufferer, so that their impressions might react on the patient. It is my painful duty, therefore, to tell you fairly, that I have little—*very* little hope of saving either of those two poor girls."

"Good heavens ! How shocking !" said the elder Batt.

A look of awe came over young Ben's face ; but the quick eye of the doctor failed to see in its expression the look of misery which

he had fully expected his communication to produce.

"It is sad, indeed; I had great fears from the first. You see, there was very little stamina to resist disease. Twins, you know! Twins are rarely of robust constitution. Yes, it is a very sad case. And specially so as regards those two admirable girls who have remained to nurse their sisters. I am very much afraid that one of them, if not both, may have to suffer for their devotion," said the doctor, eyeing his younger visitor curiously.

Ben and his father looked at each other with dismay in their faces, and Dr. Granger was at once struck by the notion that his last communication was touching more nearly the main spring of his visitors' interest in the case.

"One, if not both . . . ?" faltered young Ben, turning very pale.

"Yes, I said so," said the doctor, in answer to Ben's implied query; "because, when I was at the hall, an hour or two ago, I saw great reason to fear that Miss Stilwinche is sickening for the disease. The symptoms looked very like it. In fact, I should be deluding you if

I affected to have any doubt about the matter.

"Miss Stilwinche?" said Mr. Batt, enquiringly.

"Yes, Miss Penelope, the eldest. She was ailing this afternoon; and I make very little doubt, that to-morrow morning I shall find that small-pox has declared itself in her case also."

"Poor girl! poor girl!" said Mr. Batt, dropping his head on his chest.

"Yes, I am truly sorry for her. There is no telling you what a nurse she has been. Miss Pen never spares herself," said the doctor.

"But Miss Beatrice continues well?" asked Ben the younger; and when he had spoken the words, the doctor thought that now he knew where his young friend's interest centred.

"As yet, Miss Beatrice continues well; and there is no reason why she should not remain so. All constitutions are not susceptible to the poison, nor are they so at all times. Her fatigue has been very great, but she bears up against it wonderfully. But now she will

have a third patient on her hands. Poor child! And she is even a better nurse than Miss Stilwinche—equally active and self-forgetting, and more quiet. I never saw a more valuable person in a sick room. She is a real treasure.”

“And as to Miss Stilwinche? . . . do you apprehend . . . do you think that her life is likely to be in danger?” asked Mr. Batt, senior, with a wistful look.

“My dear sir, no person can have the small-pox without danger to life. But there is no immediate cause for urgent alarm as regards Miss Stilwinche. I am decidedly of opinion that her chance would be a much better one than that of either of the twins. She is strongly constituted, and is a thoroughly healthy woman, in the very fullest vigour of her life. I should hope that she might have as good a chance as anybody could—although the type of the disease, as it has developed itself in her sisters, is, it cannot be denied, a particularly virulent one.”

Mr. Batt sighed deeply when the doctor ceased speaking, and there was something in the expression of this sigh, or in that of his

face, which made his son cast as curious and attentive a glance on him, as the doctor had observed him himself with.

"Thank you, doctor," said the elder Batt, preparing to take his leave; "would it be trespassing too much on your kindness if my son and I were to walk over to-morrow evening, about this time, and ask you for the latest news of your patients?"

"Not at all, my dear sir; not at all. It is a longish walk,—but if you think it worth while, you may depend upon my giving you the exact state of the case, as far as I know it," said the doctor, giving his hand to both his visitors.

"This is a bad business, Ben," said his father, gloomily, as they started on their walk home to the farm, "a very bad business. I can't tell you how grieved I am."

Ben answered at first only by a sigh, which was almost a groan. "Bad, indeed. But thank Heaven, Beatrice is all right, so far. I am so glad, father, that you told him we would come over again to-morrow night. It is the only way to get at the real truth."

"Yes, Ben, my boy. I am glad for your

sake—glad with all my heart, that your Miss Beatrice is all right as yet. But I am thinking of that poor Pen. I knew she was a right down good one. The first time I ever saw her, among all that lot of sisters, I saw that she was one of that sort that thinks more of other people than they do of themselves.”

“I dare say she will pull through Miss Pen will. But then there is the danger of being marked,” said the young man.

“I don’t think so much about that as some people do,” said Mr. Batt, with a tone and manner that caused his son to look sharp round at his father, with a sharp glance, as if some idea, which was both new and surprising, had at that moment entered his head for the first time.

“I’d give a trifle to ensure against the danger of Beatrice being marked by the horrid complaint,” said young Ben.

“Naturally you would. Naturally at your time of life, Ben and I’d a deal rather that Miss Pen was not, for that matter,” said his father, appearing, in a manner that seemed to Ben strange, to assume a similarity of relative position between himself and Miss Pene-

lope Stilwinche, to that which was understood to exist between his son and Miss Beatrice.

Nothing more, however, was said between them then upon the subject ; and during the greater part of their walk homeward, both the elder and the younger man remained silently occupied with their own reflections.


It was some time beyond the usual bed-going hour at the farm when they reached Copleford. But they saw a light in the window of the sitting-room.

"There is Charlie, waiting for us," said Ben.

The noise of their feet on the gravel as they passed the front of the house was heard by the watcher in the parlour, and when they reached the porch, the house door had already been opened for them by . . . Peter !

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. BATT MEDITATES.

“HAT, is that you, Peter ?” said Ben, as the door was opened to them.

“Yes ; you are sooner than I expected. It is not long since they have all gone to bed. What news did you get from the doctor ?” said Peter.

“Charlie promised he would sit up for us,” said Ben.

“Yes ; but Charlie was tired. He asked me to do it for him. But there has been no sitting up, to speak of. Besides, I should not have gone to bed any way, for I was anxious to hear what news the doctor gave you,” said Peter, lighting them into the house.

“Bad news enough, Peter, my boy.

Couldn't be worse news—hardly," said Mr. Batt, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"The doctor says there's little or no hope of the lives of the poor twins . . . and he thinks—indeed he has little doubt—that Miss Penelope is going to have the disease," said Ben.

"Oh, I *am* so sorry! And Beatrice?" asked Peter, stealing a quick and covered look at Ben.

"Beatrice, as yet, is all right," said Ben, gloomily.

"Thank God for that!" said Peter, very fervently.

"Thank you for that, dear, good Peter," said Ben, stealing out his hand to Peter's, and giving it a squeeze. "Yes," he added, with a sigh, "she is all right, so far; but God knows how long she may remain so. Just think of the risk."

"Some people, they say, are not liable to it. And Miss Beatrice always looks so strong and so full of health," said Peter.

"Well, a blot is no blot till it is hit. But there's that poor girl Penelope is hit. Ah, if they lose her, I'm thinking they'll begin to

know the value of her. Well, come boys, I suppose we had better be getting to bed," said Mr. Batt, with a deep sigh.

The next morning, at breakfast, the bad tidings which the two Batts had brought home from Petheram were told.

"Poor people. I am sure that I am sorry for them with all my heart," said Miss Jemima, tranquilly enough.

"I suppose there is nothing we could do for them in any way?" said her brother.

"I am sure that all of you, and dear Miss Cornland in particular, have done enough in kindly allowing me to come here. I can never be thankful enough for saving me from the horrible danger!" said Miss Barbara, with an expression of fervent gratitude quite proper to the occasion.

"The two younger ladies, I presume, are not of age; but the propriety of making a will should be suggested to Miss Penelope," said Ikey Batt.

"Poor Penelope has nothing to leave," said Barbara, with a curiously nauseous mixture of mock sympathy and genuine sneer.

"Come out and take a turn on the gravel

walk, Ben, if you have done your breakfast. I can't eat any more," said Mr. Batt, bestowing, as he rose from the table, a look of scorn and detestation on Miss Barbara, so fiercely scathing and terrible in its expression, that that somewhat case-hardened young lady positively winced under it.

"I suppose you will be going up to the hall this morning, Ben," said his father when they had left the breakfast-table, and were on the gravel walk, which ran from the porch to the gate leading into the park.

"Yes!—though there is never much to be got out of any of the servants. They always say that they are much the same as yesterday. But I can't keep away from the house, that's the fact," said young Ben.

"Very well, then, I'll go on my errand by myself. Any way I could not have taken you into the house with me," returned his father.

"What house? Where are you off to, father?" asked his son.

"The best way not to be thinking of one's own trouble is to be doing something. When I saw that poor girl Maggie yesterday, my

heart smote me that I had let so many days go by without doing for her what I believe I can do. And I determined that I would go and see that old mother what is it she calls herself? The mother of the young fellow that is sweet on Miss Maggie to day. You must tell me how to find her," said Mr. Batt.

"Fitzwilliam her name is. She is lodging, in the house of a certain Farmer Gilling, at Whitton; Whitton Parva, they call it. You'll have no difficulty in finding your way over the down to Whitton; and when you are in the village, anybody will tell you which is Farmer Gilling's house. It is the farmhouse nearest the vicarage, where Augustus' tutor lives," said Ben.

"All right! I shall find it. Farmer Gilling's at Whitton. Which way do you go up the down?" asked Mr. Batt.

"Up the bostell, that turns to the left out of the lane; . . . for that is what they call those deep hollow roads over the downs in this part of the country. You can't miss your way," said his son.

"All right, I think I'll be off at once.

What a regular out and out beast that Barbara is. She made me sick to hear her. I could hardly keep my hands from flinging a tea-cup at her head," said Mr. Batt.

"You looked at her as if you meant all that and something else on the top of it, I can tell you. Yes, with all her pretty face she is a nasty one, and no mistake. I wouldn't hurry over the down if I was you, father; for if you are too early, I take it you'll be likely to find the old lady in bed," remarked Ben.

"She'll get up fast enough when she hears who's come to see her. Well, I wish you may hear something good at the hall. I shall be back by dinner time . . . unless the old lady cuts up rougher than I expect she will. Any way don't let them wait for me."

And with that the father and son parted—the father to take his way over the downs to Whitton, and the latter across the park to Combe Mavis.

Mr. Batt would have enjoyed his walk over the Sussex downs much, if his heart had been as light in his bosom as it was wont to be. But this was by no means the case. A very short time since it would have seemed impossible to him

that the fortunes and misfortunes of a set of people, whose names he had never heard a month ago, should have touched him as nearly as he was touched by what was passing in the house at Combe Mavis. Nor did he make any attempt to delude himself with the idea that his hopes and fears in the matter were occasioned solely by his care for his son's interests and happiness. He clearly admitted to himself, that there was an aspect of the matter that touched him yet more nearly. Had his old friend Mr. Sylvester, the lawyer, suggested to him a month ago, in the words he used during their interview a few days previously in Symonds' Inn, the possibility of his marrying a second time, Mr. Batt would have repudiated the idea far more violently and decisively than he did upon that occasion. In truth the notion that he might possibly do so had already occurred to him. Who shall say what exactly it is that so attracts any man to any woman, as to make him feel that she of all the world of women, is the one whom he would desire to make the companion and the load-star of his life? Probably in no case can the man himself state with accuracy and

entireness what qualities of mind or body, what specialities, material or spiritual, have led him to a conclusion of the correctness of which he has no more doubt than he has of his own existence.

Mr. Batt had been thus impressed by Penelope Stilwinche, and he had no difficulty in assigning to himself sundry good and undeniable reasons for his preference. She was the providence of the household. She was active, industrious, unselfish, and unsparing of herself. And no doubt these were qualities of a kind well calculated to excite Mr. Batt's admiration. But he could hardly have pretended to himself that these qualities, wherever he might have met with them, would have made the conquest of his heart. It appeared to him that Miss Penelope possessed charms of person to a very considerable degree. Now Penelope was not an ugly girl by any means; she had a clear healthy complexion, a good bright eye, and white teeth. Though somewhat thickly made, she was upright, brisk and quick in her movements, and if not exactly lithe, at least "trim" in figure. But it had never occurred to any other man

hitherto to see in her the amount of personal charm that Mr. Batt found in her face and person. And the "why" of this is the question to which it is so impossible to get any satisfactory reply. Which comes first? Was Mr. Batt rendered especially appreciative of Miss Pen's good qualities by the mysterious attraction which made her person seem beautiful to him, or was the reverse the case?

That no such speculations suggested themselves to Mr. Batt's practical mind as he tramped along at a smart pace over the breezy Whitton downs, with the purpose-like step of a man who has been used all his life to walk with a view to arriving at his destination, rather than the elastic springy gait of the man who is wont to walk for the pleasure of walking, may be easily believed. But directly or indirectly he was thinking of Penelope Stilwinche and of his now ascertained purpose to make her his wife all the time—of his purpose to make her his wife, *if*, by the blessing of God, she should escape from the great peril which now overshadowed her. At one moment his thoughts turned not unpleasantly to the strangeness of the fact that he, Ben

Batt, the disinherited son of Stanton and Cornwall's old clerk, should be thinking of marrying—as he flattered himself with a very good prospect of not finding any insuperable obstacle in the wishes of the lady or her family,—the eldest daughter of a landed gentleman, the landlord of his old master's son. But the main current of his meditations ran upon the chances that he might lose her by the agency of a power against which there was no struggling. And unquestionably the consideration of this danger had the effect of enhancing to his mind the idea of the happiness that would be his if it should be escaped from, and he should be able eventually to call Penelope his wife. Then he found himself speculating how far it was likely that his son had guessed anything as to his feelings and intentions on this subject; and what probability there was that his father's second marriage might be unwelcome to Ben, who was himself hoping to marry a sister of the lady not many years younger than herself.

But Mr. Batt had no very serious misgivings upon this subject. He had fully made up his mind as to what he intended to

do with regard to his son as to money matters. Having ascertained that it was Ben's genuine purpose to face the world, as he phrased it, with his wife, and to make his own way in it by the force of his own brains and his own hands, and having in part ascertained (purposing however, to obtain greater assurance on this point before he declared his intentions) that the girl his son had chosen was minded to accept such a lot as his wife, he had determined to make such an up-hill path unnecessary to him. He had no fear that the possession of a competence would now turn the young man into a ne'er-do-well. By virtue of all the habits, and ideas, and associations of his life he was active in mind and body, and had learned, ineffaceably it might be hoped, to consider this world a place for work. To have brought up his child from infancy to know that all his wants had been and would be provided for without effort of his own, Mr. Batt would have considered a far more dangerous and inexpedient course. His determination, therefore, was simply to halve what he possessed between himself and his son. There was twenty thousand a-piece

for them, amply enough, Mr. Batt thought, for any man to marry and bring up a family on with all comfort and respectability.

It was a very generous purpose ; a liberality which not many men, situated as Mr. Batt was, would have deemed themselves called on to practise. Possibly if the old colonist had had a larger experience of England and English life, he might have been more awake to the superiority of an income from a fortune of forty thousand pounds, to that arising from twenty thousand. But he was largely endowed with that practical good sense which saved him from being led into the temptation to increase his store merely by the largeness of the amount he had acquired. He really and honestly considered that "enough" was not only "as good as," but in many respects much better, than "a feast."

Then, again, he had a tender feeling, growing like a half unnoticed but sweetly fragrant little plant from out of the greenest spot in his past life and memory, that in acting as he proposed to act by his son, he was doing justice to, and acting fairly by, the wife he had loved so well, and had lost. Had they not

been true partners during all the hard up-hill time while this money was being accumulated? Had not their hopes and fears, their anxieties, and, in many respects, their toils, been in common? Had not this money been earned by them together? And was not Ben the proper representative of the lost partner in the old firm?


Mr. Batt, moreover, was well pleased that he could spare his son much that he had himself encountered. He was delighted, indeed, when he heard young Ben express the fearless purpose of going forth to do battle with the world and make it his oyster. But he knew what the opening of this oyster cost sufficiently well to rejoice that he had opened it to such purpose as to serve his son's needs as well as his own. He saw with pleasure that in consequence of Ben's not having been constrained to begin that process of opening at the time of life when he had himself begun it, his son was already much that he could never be, and had acquired much that he could never acquire. And it was a great satisfaction to him to believe that the future exemption from the necessities which had

made up his own early life, would enable the young man to leave in his progress the root from which he had sprung yet further and further behind him.

Then suddenly across all such pleasant thoughts came the recollection of the terrible chances even now overhanging his own scheme of future happiness. And between the one train of thought and the other, Mr. Batt arrived at Farmer Gilling's door without having given any consideration to the special business on which he was bound, or having at all settled in his mind the method and manner of his communications with Mrs. Fitzwilliam.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

RS. GILLING was washing a churn close to the door which opened from the house to the farm-yard, when Mr. Batt reached the farm, and in reply to his inquiry whether Mrs. Fitzwilliam was lodging there, and whether the lady was then visible, told him that Mrs. Fitzwilliam had been their inmate for some time past, that she was talking of leaving them in a day or two, and that she, Mrs. Gilling, believed that Mrs. Fitzwilliam had left her bed-room for her parlour not five minutes ago.

“Rather late times for coming down to breakfast at this hour, isn’t it, ma’am?” said Mr. Batt, politely.

"Laws, sir! she have had her breakfast these two hours! She always, or a'most always, breakfasts in bed, Mrs. Fitzwilliam does, but then she have the right so to do, for she pays her pay, and they do say she is as rich as a Jew," replied Mrs. Gilling, whose conceptions of the rights of property were of most unexceptionably orthodox kind.

"Well, I suppose I can see her now, then?" returned Batt.

"I suppose you can, sir; I will go up and see," said Mrs. Gilling, drying her hands upon her apron. "If you would be pleased to walk round to the front door, I will come and open it, and tell you what she says. What name shall I say, please, sir?" added Mrs. Gilling, eyeing Ben rather curiously.

"You know Farmer Cornland, of Coppel-ford?" asked Ben.

"Surely, sir, we know Mr. Cornland and Miss Jemima very well, likewise Master Charles, and Master Peter," said Mrs. Gilling.

"Well, then, I am a friend of Mr. Cornland's. I'm staying at the farm. Never mind about my name. Your lodger will

know it when she hears it. Tell her a friend of Mr. Cornland's has walked over from Copleford to see her," replied Batt.

"Very well, sir. I'll come down and open the door directly."

Mrs. Gilling did *not* come down directly, and Ben began to fear that Mrs. Fitzwilliam might have learned his presence in the neighbourhood, and determined not to see him. No such cause, however, had delayed Mrs. Gilling's return. The fact was, that though Mrs. Fitzwilliam had truly, as her landlady stated, come out from her bed-room to her sitting-room, she had not yet so arrayed herself as to be in what she considered fitting trim to receive "a gentleman from Mr. Cornland's." And she insisted on Mrs. Gilling adding her assistance to that of her own maid Smithers, for the production of such a result as should impress the gentleman from Mr. Cornland's with a due sense of the importance of the lady he was speaking to. To this end a new best chestnut-brown front, with two rows of short crisp curls, had to be tied on; a grand yellow turban of portentous size had to be hoisted on to the top of it; a gorgeous and

glowing robe of scarlet satin to be donned ; a superb cashmere shawl of brilliant green to be thrown over the three feet wide shoulders ; and a quantity of massive ornaments, including an immense gold chain like that of an alderman around the bull neck, to be adjusted on different parts of the person. Then the lady took her place majestically in the centre of Mrs. Gilling's little sofa, and with her two fat hands on her knees, held rather widely apart, very much in the attitude of an Egyptian idol, awaited the coming of her visitor, whom Mrs. Gilling had been at last permitted to summon.

"Servant, ma'am," said Mr. Batt, in a cheery tone, as without waiting to be invited to take a chair, he sat himself down in one immediately facing Mrs. Fitzwilliam, so that the sofa table, behind which she was sitting, was between them.

"Excuse me, sir, if I don't raise. At my time o' life a body grows to be sitsome," said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, bowing as she sat.

"Certainly, ma'am. Don't mention it by any means," said Batt.

"You come from Coppelford, sir ?" said Mrs.

Fitzwilliam, somewhat doubtfully after a pause, during which both the lady and the gentleman had been examining each other curiously.

"Yes, ma'am, from Coppelford last. But I've come from a pretty deal further off than that, I have!" said Batt, looking hard at her.

"And where may that be, then, if a body may ask? Leastways . . . not that it is any matter to me where you come from, till I know what brings you here," said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, with an evidently increasing degree of uneasiness and embarrassment.

"What brings me here, ma'am? Only the natteral liking to see an old friend, and the memory of old times, like," said Mr. Batt.

"You have quite the advantage of me, sir. To the best of my knowledge and belief, I never set eyes on you before," said the lady, whose uneasiness was very plainly increasing.

"It is like enough that you may have forgotten the look of my mug. It's not that good-looking that a lady would remember it. But I am sure you have not forgotten the name of Batt—Ben Batt, of Quainton's Claim," said Ben, with a pleasant smile.

It was evident that Mrs. Fitzwilliam had in truth not recollected Mr. Batt's appearance before. And equally evident that she remembered his name and all about him well enough, now she heard it. She turned very pale, and looked hurriedly to the left and to the right, as if she were seeking for aid, or meditating the possibility of escape. Nevertheless she very soon rallied, and made up her mind to brazen the matter out.

"I dunno what you mean, not I. You must be making some strange mistake, my man . . . if it isn't sommut wuss you're up to. But it won't do, whatever it is. I'm not such a hunprotected female as you may think for, mister—whatever your name is. The Honourable and Reverend gent as is my son's tutorer, and the parson of this here parish, is a magistrate as well. And if I was to say the word, you might perhaps know what the parish stocks was, my man, if you never knowed it afore now."

"Ah, but you'll never go for to say such a word as that, Mrs. Bolder, come now, and me an old acquaintance," said Ben, still smiling pleasantly at the lady across the table.

A second time Mrs. Fitzwilliam turned very pale ; but a second time she rallied, and determined not to give in without another attempt at escape. To escape from Ben's eye, which pinned her, as it seemed to her, against the wall behind the sofa on which she was sitting, was the most urgent necessity ; but there was no possibility of achieving it.

"I tell you, friend, you are mistaking me for somebody else. My name is Fitzwilliam well known as such. Any man may make a mistake ; but when he is told of it, it ought to be enough. So if it is all one to you, I'll bid *you* a good morning. I have had quite enough of this, and don't want any more of it."

"It won't do, ma'am. Why, Lord bless ye, if you remembered as much about me as I do about you, you wouldn't think for a minute that you could deceive me. I knew old Bob Smithers, your first husband. I know that his sister is in the house, and was helping you to dress yourself, a few minutes ago. I know where his brother, the marine store dealer as was, is living out in Higman's Road, at Blackwall ; I knew Aaron Bolder, your second husband, and all about him, and

all about the great gold-dust robbery, when he and his pals overpowered the escort, and I, as well as a lot of others, lost our property. Come, ma'am, you see we are old acquaintances, and it's no use attempting to deceive each other," said Mr. Batt, still smiling across the table with the utmost good humour.

Mrs. Fitzwilliam was for a while too much overpowered to be able to say a word in reply to Mr. Batt's vigorous attack. She lay back on the sofa with her fat hands hanging down on either side of her, and her face drooping on her ample bosom.

"Come, Mrs. B., let's shake hands upon it," said Batt, cheerily, and putting out his hand across the table as he spoke.

"Well, Mr. Batt, there's no gainsaying you; and if you are willing to shake hands upon it, I can't be no otherwise. But a body has got a right to call themselves what name they like. And how do you know that when I lost Bolder, I did not marry again. Any way, my name is now Fitzwilliam," said the stout lady, having by this time pretty well recovered her presence of mind and assurance.

"All right, Mrs. Fitzwilliam," said Batt,

with a hearty cheery manner, but with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, that, to anybody capable of understanding the meaning of it, might have caused a suspicion that there was more to come behind ; “ All right ! It is not for me to say that there may not have been a third dear departed, whose name was Fitzwilliam ; and if he cut up as well as Smithers and Bolder did, you must be pretty comfortable by this time.”

“ Pretty well, for that, Mr. Batt ; I’ve no call to go for to deny it. There’s my Augustus, with a honourable gent, the brother of a lord, for his tutor, is as fine a young fellow as you could clap your eyes on, and a match for any lady in the land, though I says it, who am his mother. He’ll have a fortin as many a lord’s gal ’ll only be too glad to get hold on,” said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, with much triumph and complacency.

“ Augustus, his name is, eh ! That’s a very grand name ; Augustus Bolder. I suppose he’ll inherit that lot of gold dust his father robbed me of, together with the rest,” said Mr. Batt, looking the lady full in the face, and winking hard as he spoke.

"Parcel of stuff," cried the lady, reddening considerably, "what's the good of talking of them as is dead and gone, and of by-gones that are gone and forgotten. Augustus Bolder, indeed. There's no such person as Augustus Bolder, and never was. Augustus Fitzwilliam, his name is; and I think I ought to know."

"No doubt, ma'am! But if ladies can change their names, young men can't! His father's name was Bolder—Aaron Bolder, a convict, registered as such, and, bless you, all his biography written down, and can be sworn to any day. And his son's name is Bolder, and most likely Aaron too. That's all about it," said Mr. Batt, with merciless perspicuity.

Mrs. Fitzwilliam, during the first part of this speech, grew redder and redder, and then, during the latter part of it, turned suddenly deadly pale. She pressed her fat hands to the place where deep soundings might have found her heart, and gasped out, "Brandy! Give me a glass, quick! In the shufflenear there!"

Mr. Batt opened the door of the piece of furniture Mrs. Fitzwilliam had thus designated, and there found, not only a bottle, partly full

but a wineglass by the side of it ; so that he was able to administer to the lady the cordial she had asked for, with very little loss of time. Mrs. Fitzwilliam tossed it down at a gulp, in a style that a young cabman might have envied, and then began to feel better. After tossing her turbaned head heavily two or three times from side to side, and heaving a few husky sighs, she put her hand to her side again, and sitting up on the sofa, said, "There, before you put it back in the shuffle-near, give me another nip, . . . just half a glass. Bless you," she added, in reply to a doubtful sort of look on the part of Mr. Batt ; "there ain't no strength in it. It's half water. They are such cheats hereabouts."

Mr. Batt gave her the other half glass, and then replaced the bottle in the cupboard from which he had taken it.

"You've been and upset me to that degree, you have, I hardly know what I'm a doing, or what I'm a saying. And I don't believe a word of it, for that matter. What's the use of coming here, raking up old stories . . . that nobody wants to hear nothing about. And I'd look at home, if I was you, before I

throw'd stones at other folk. You've a good coat on your back, and look mighty respectable now; but I've seen the day as you was grubbing in the mud, in your shirt-sleeves, and hard put to it to find a bit of vittles to keep body and soul together."

"Quite true, ma'am, every word of it, and a deal more besides; and all the world knows it, . . . or might know it, if they cared to ask me. I don't want anybody to think any ways different of me from the real truth. So that's neither here nor there. But I can understand that you don't want your boy to pass for the son of a convict."

"Don't say such wicked things, for goodness sake! you'll give me the 'orrors again, you will," cried Mrs. Fitzwilliam, giving symptoms of "going off" again.

"Well, come, I won't then. But what signifies saying them to *you*? *We* understand each other. But suppose I was to go and tell the honourable and reverend gent, your son's tutor, and all the rest of them, all about Aaron Bolder, and his widow, and his son, and have it all put in the newspapers, it wouldn't be so pleasant, you know, would it?"

said Mr. Batt, who had resumed his place at the sofa table, immediately opposite to the lady, and was leaning across it, and looking hard into her face, with his own between his two hands, while his elbow rested on the table.

"You don't mean to say, that you'd go for to think of going for to do such a wicked, mean thing as that?" said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, returning his gaze with horror-stricken eyes.

"Well, no; I don't say that I see as I have any call to rip up old stories,—nor nothing of the kind—if so be that you are minded to take a little bit of advice I want to give you upon a certain subject," said Mr. Batt, putting a strong emphasis upon the 'if,' which indicated that his silence was to be conditional.

"Advice! You want me to do sommat as you'd have me do? What is it? Name the figure!" said the lady, with an unsuccessful attempt to conceal her painful anxiety.

"Well, look here now! This boy of yours has been making love to a girl near here, and she fancies him. Tell him you have no objection to his marrying her, and are ready to

come down handsome to set the young folks up. That's all."

"What, that Maggie Stilwinche, as they call her!" screamed Mrs. Fitzwilliam; "why she has neither the least bit of a handle to her name, nor a penny in her purse. They're all as poor as church-mice. A pretty thing. Why you don't know, Mr. Batt, the fortin that Augustus will have."

"More reason he don't want any with the girl," said Ben.

"No more he don't—no more I don't for him. I know very well there's a many of real lords' daughters hasn't a sixpence to bless themselves with. But then they can make the man that marries them a tip-top swell if so be that he's got plenty of the ready. But this girl she's nothing no more than the dirt under your feet," said Mrs. Fitzwilliam.

"She's a lady born and a very pretty girl; and, as far as I can learn, a very good girl," said Mr. Batt.

"I'm not a-going to have it, Mr. Batt. I knows what I want, and that girl's not what I want. If Augustus marries her he need not

look to me for a shilling—so that's all about it," returned Mrs. Fitzwilliam, thus clenching the matter.

"No, not all about it, ma'am. You want me to hold my tongue about old stories and old by-gones. I want you to give your consent to your son's marriage with Miss Maggie Stilwinche. *If* you'll do as I'd have you, I'll do as you'd have me. Come, that's clear, and a fair bargain," said Ben.

"Now, Mr. Batt, you're not going to be so cantankerous and on-reasonable as that. I'm willing to act handsome—I can afford to. Name your figure. What'll you take to give me your word not to let on as ever you know'd me or mine? That's the reasonable way to look at it," said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, little doubting that her present object, like all other things within the scope of her conception, could be obtained by the expenditure of money.

"I've named my figure, ma'am. You see I'm like you, so far. I don't want any more money, seeing I've plenty. So if you and I wish to oblige each other . . . as I feel sure we do, for the sake of old times, . . . we

must do it in some other way than money. You don't want money from me, and I don't want money from you. You want me to forget all about everything that ever happened to you afore I had the honour of seeing you this here morning; and I want you to take as nice a girl for your daughter-in-law as ever a young fellow's mother could wish for. If we can agree well and good; if we can't, why your boy 'll run away from you; the girl he is sweet on will break her heart; and everybody in England will know that the rich Mrs. Fitzwilliam is the widow of Aaron Bolder, the convict. Now, *that* is all about it. How shall it be?"

"D'rat the man!" said Mrs. Fitzwilliam, pondering deeply.

"Yes, ma'am. How shall it be?" reiterated Mr. Batt.

"In course I've no choice," said the lady, sulkily.

"Well, then, ma'am, since I have had the honour of making your acquaintance here for the first time, perhaps you will allow me to call upon you again in a day or two? Your landlady mentioned that you were thinking of

leaving this. If I was you I would stay awhile for the wedding ; otherwise, you know, I shall have to inquire after you at Higman's Road. Good morning, ma'am."

And with that Mr. Batt bowed himself out, and leaving the farm-house, turned his face toward Copleford.

CHAPTER XVI.

A VERY ODD CIRCUMSTANCE.



THE task he had been engaged on at farmer Gilling's of bringing Mrs. Fitzwilliam to her reason had not been an unpleasant one to Mr. Batt. He believed himself to be securing the happiness of poor little Maggie Stilwinche and her adorer ; his sense of humour and fun had been tickled ; the especial talent which he possessed of bending others to his will, and which, like every other talent, made the exercise of it agreeable to him, had been pleasurably exercised. And as long as the contest with the recalcitrant lady had lasted, all these circumstances had for the passing hour banished from his mind the thought of his anxieties

respecting the progress of affairs at the hall. But as soon as he had left the lady, and had begun his solitary walk back to Copleford, his mind recurred to the thought that each passing hour might be . . . nay probably was determining in one sense or the other the "to be or not to be" of all that, during the last few days, he had taught himself to consider as the basis of the future happiness of his life. He would have decided on going round by the hall on his way to Copleford, in the hope of hearing some tidings, had it not been that he was sure that he should find his son at the farm with the most recent intelligence procurable.

On coming down from the downs into Thrimbleby Lane, he encountered his son, who was coming to meet him.

"Did you get any news at the hall, Ben?" asked Mr. Batt, as soon as he was within speaking distance.

"I've just come back, and I knew you'd be anxious . . . There's nothing good to be told. I managed to catch Mr. Granger coming out. Miss Pen is in for it. She has taken the disease. But he says he sees no reason at present

to be alarmed for her. He said it had come out very strong all over her, but that this was rather a good symptom than otherwise—that she was a very healthy subject, . . . very different from the other two poor girls. It is all over with them, I'm afraid."

"And Miss Beatrice?" asked his father with an anxious look at Ben.

"Beatrice is all right so far, thank God . . . working like a horse. You may guess how she has to work. The doctor says he never saw anybody spare herself so little, or keep up so wonderfully. He says she must have the strength and the spirit of a dozen girls. He thinks the chances are that she won't take it," said Ben as he turned to walk back with his father.

"Did you tell them the news at the house? Did you tell that Barbara girl?" asked Mr. Batt.

"No, I did n't go into the house. I asked whether you had come back, and when I found you had not I started to meet you. Well, what luck had you with the old lady?" asked Ben.

"Oh! I soon brought her down on her

marrow-bones. I think *that* business will be all right ; but you must not say a word to anybody yet. This young Fitzwilliam by-the-bye, that reminds me of something I must ask a question about. I must go and write a letter for this afternoon's post. You can tell them the news from the hall, while I go upstairs to write my letter. I shan't be long," said Mr. Batt, as they reached the farmhouse.

The fact was, that Mr. Batt in thinking over what had passed between himself and Mrs. Fitzwilliam, felt some doubts as to the correctness of the statement he had made, to the effect that though a lady might change her name by marriage, a man could not do so. He had known, in the course of his experience, many cases of persons being known by names which they certainly had not inherited from their fathers ; and he had also seen in the newspapers mention of gentlemen who had changed their names ; and he was anxious to understand what might be the rights of this matter, as regarded his young client, Augustus Fitzwilliam, who was unquestionably *nè Bolder*.

On entering the house, therefore, Mr. Batt went up to his little chamber over the flowered porch, which has been so frequently mentioned, and taking a compact little writing-case from his portmanteau, proceeded to write the following letter, in a large and very legible, but singularly angular and not very clerkly hand :—

“MR. DAVID SYLVESTER.

“DEAR SIR,

“Your favour with reply from the Isle of Man is anxiously expected. My present object, however, in troubling you with these lines is to ask a question about another matter. What is the law about people changing their names? You read in the papers about people having permission to change their names, but I’ve known a many people who changed their name, and didn’t ever have permission from nobody. And if so be as a young man has been called all his life by a name as wasn’t his father’s name, can he be punished for it, or how about it? When next I have the pleasure to see you, sir, I will tell you what

for I want to be answered these questions. Meantime, hoping for a reply at your earliest convenience,

“ I am, dear sir,

“ Yours respectfully,

“ BENJAMIN BATT.”

To this letter Mr. Batt received by return of post the following reply :—

“ DEAR SIR,

“ The reply from my correspondent in the Isle of Man has just come to hand. It is a somewhat singular one. The entries respecting the baptism of the parties in question are not to be found in the register. It is odd enough, and of course must lead to further inquiry. My correspondent having been simply requested to send extracts of such entries, merely replies that no such entries are to be found. I shall await further communication with you before taking any ulterior steps. Respecting your question as to a man's taking a different name from that borne by his father, the answer is short and simple. Any man

may call himself by any name he chooses, and needs no permission from anybody or authority to do so. If John Brown declares on Monday morning that whereas he went to bed on Sunday night John Brown, he now and henceforward chooses to be called John Smith, he is John Smith to all intents and purposes. Of course you will easily perceive that a thousand circumstances may occur in which such a change of name may be found to be very inconvenient, may give rise to mistakes, and very probably to not unreasonable though unfounded suspicions. Of course, also, it is evident that the chance of mistake, and the danger of giving rise to suspicion will be diminished in proportion to the degree of publicity given to the change in question. In the case of a young man who has all his life been called by a name which was not his father's, the name he has taken may be said to have become more his own than the name his father bore. Unquestionably no punishment could be incurred by any such change, and the person in question could bear and use, sue and be sued, marry or inherit under the name

he has been known by, say twenty years, more conveniently, than by the name his father was known by.

“ I am, dear sir,

“ Yours faithfully,

“ DAVID SYLVESTER.”

The latter part of this letter was satisfactory, for it removed some misgivings which had occurred to Mr. Batt respecting the fact that the young gentleman now known to the world as Augustus Fitzwilliam had unquestionably been, as the French phrase has it, *born Bolder*. But the first part of the letter which referred to the extracts from the baptismal register of the parish in which the two young Cornlands had been born threw Mr. Batt into considerable perplexity. What could be the meaning of it? He knew that the boys had been born in the island; he knew also, as it happened, that they had been baptized at the church of which his brother was the parish clerk. How could it be that the record of the baptism should not appear in the parish register?

After a little consideration of the circum-

stances, he determined to mention the matter to Mr. Cornland, and after the early dinner that day, with a view to putting this resolution into execution, he asked the farmer whether he would come and smoke his after-dinner pipe under the porch, as there was a subject on which he wanted to speak to him.

"You remember what I told you, Mr. Cornland, soon after I came here, as to my desire to act in this matter of your brother's money in such a way as I think he would most wish if he were alive to do it himself?" began Mr. Batt, when he and his companion had both filled their pipes and lighted them.

"Surely, Mr. Batt, surely. It is not a matter a man would be likely to forget so easily. Twenty thousand pounds is an important sum," said Mr. Cornland, expecting to hear what determination Mr. Batt had arrived at on the subject, and not a little eager for the intelligence.

"Well, being anxious, you understand to do everything regular and shipshape, and speaking the other day to an old friend—you know him, to be sure you do. . . . Old David Sylvester at Symonds' Inn. . . . I asked him

as he happened to be writing to a correspondent in the Island, to get me the baptismal register of these boys' births—leastways of their baptisms," said Mr. Batt, pausing in the midst of his speech to improve the filling of his pipe by a little additional pressure of its contents, and being prevented by that occupation from observing the sudden change in the expression of the farmer's face which his words had occasioned. Had his eyes not been fixed on his pipe bowl he could not have failed to notice the sudden drop of the jaw, and rush of blood to the cheeks and forehead which indicated the farmer's discomposure. As it was he proceeded in perfect unconsciousness of the effect his words had produced.

"And just now, when I came back from my walk to Whitton, I got a letter from Sylvester in which he tells me that no such entries are to be found in the register. Odd, isn't it? But I suppose there must be some mistake. The boys were both born in the place where you first settled, and were regularly baptized, I suppose?" said Mr. Batt, with his eyes still occupied with his pipe.

"To be sure, of course. Where should

they be born?" returned the farmer, evidently becoming more and more uneasy.

"Well, I thought there could be no mistake about that. . . . And baptized in the parish church. . . . That 'un where my brother is clerk, eh?" said Ben without the smallest suspicion of the effect his words were producing upon his companion.

"Of course they were baptized in the parish church. Where else?" rejoined the farmer fidgeting in his seat in the manner of a man who is anxious to bring a disagreeable conversation to a conclusion.

"How does it come to pass then that the register is not to be found? Doesn't it seem very odd? Can you account for it in any way?" persisted Mr. Batt, innocently unconscious of the annoyance he was inflicting.

"How should I know? Some carelessness or irregularity, I suppose. They are very careless about such matters in the Island. It is not as if it were in England, bless you. I am not surprised at any omission or negligence of the kind," said the farmer, with as careless an air as he could contrive to assume.

"Seems odd though too. I must talk to old Sylvester about it," said Mr. Batt, thinking to himself, as much as speaking to his companion.

"What is the good of making any bother about it? What does it signify? I don't see the use of troubling Mr. Sylvester about it," said the farmer.


"Well, I don't know that it does signify much, . . . except that I should like to do everything in proper form, you know. Charles was born about a year before his brother wasn't he?" said Mr. Batt.

"There's as nearly as possible thirteen months between them," replied Mr. Cornland, getting up to leave the porch as he spoke.

"Well, we shall see what Sylvester says about it," rejoined Mr. Batt, rising to follow him.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. CORNLAND TAKES COUNSEL WITH HIS SISTER.

HE simple and straightforward mind of Mr. Batt was not moved to conceive any suspicion of any kind by those indications of disturbance in Mr. Cornland's manner, which might have awakened such in a more attentive or less unsophisticated observer. But there was a native and habitual tenacity of purpose about the man which operated to prevent anything, which Cornland had said, from shaking his intention to speak further with Mr. Sylvester about the non-appearance of the documents he had taken it into his head to ask for.

Mr. Cornland, on the other hand, had been

made exceedingly uneasy by the conversation which has been recorded in the last chapter ; and the first result of this uneasiness was a wish for a private interview with his sister. Miss Jemima was in the habit of retiring after the early farm-house dinner to a little closet off her bedroom, which she called her own sitting-room ; and there her brother, having knocked at the door, found her. Having carefully closed the door behind him, and taken a seat on the opposite side to that at which she was sitting of the little table in front of the fire, he began.

“I have come to speak to you Jemima upon a rather disagreeable matter—or at least one that promises to become so.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Miss Jemima, without the smallest change in the expression, or rather no expression, of her cold, hard face.

“Why? Have you heard anything? What makes you say that?” asked the farmer hastily.

“No, I have heard nothing. But I never knew you want to speak to me specially upon anything else except disagreeable matters,” returned his sister

"Pooh! Don't talk nonsense, but listen to this. Benjamin Batt has taken it into his head to want documentary evidence as to the dates of the boys' births," said the farmer, looking hard at Miss *Jemima*.

"What business can it be of Mr. Batt's?" asked the lady, angrily.

"Little enough one would think. But it is in his power to award my brother's money to either of the boys, or to divide it between them as he thinks fit. . . . Surely no man ever left his fortune, a large fortune too, in such a way before! But so it is, as you know. And he's very full of the notion of doing it just as John would have wished . . . what John would have wished *I* can't guess any more than that cat there; and I don't suppose that Batt can either. But he fancies that he can; and it is for this purpose that he has taken it into his head to want the baptismal registry of the boys."

"I never heard anything so absurd in my life," said Miss *Jemima*.

"Absurd enough. It's all nonsense. But that won't mend the matter. *I* can't prevent him from applying for the documents he

fancies he requires. And he's not a man to be put off a thing he has once taken into his head. I am afraid there will be trouble," said the farmer, knitting his brows.

"I suppose he won't think of applying to anybody but you. It is not likely that he should go bothering about it to the Island," replied his sister.

"Well, I think it's very likely, seeing that his brother is living there. And as for applying, he has been applying already, through old Sylvester, the lawyer, and has got for answer, that no such entries are to be found in the registry. And that set him all agog to talk to Sylvester about it again."

"And what can Sylvester tell him? There is no entry to be found. That's all about it. Whose fault is that? Is it your fault?" said Miss Jemima.

"Sylvester will tell him that the entry must have been there; that there must have been some . . . well some dodge or other; and he'll tell him that the best person to apply to for further information on the subject is his own brother, the parish clerk," returned Mr. Cornland.

"Very well, let him go to his own brother, the parish clerk. You don't suppose that he'll get much out of Ikey, do you? Ikey knows too well which side his bread is buttered on, I'm thinking," said Jemima.

"That's true. And then this man here, this Benjamin Batt, is a very good sort of fellow—very much so. And one can't think that he would wish to make trouble—trouble to his brother as well as to us, and . . . everybody." The farmer paused and looked wistfully at his sister, got up from his chair, stood a minute with his back to the fire, sat down again, and after some hesitation continued,—
"That is if he only knew what he was doing, you see. But if he goes blundering on, determined to get at these entries in the register, or to know the reason why they are not forthcoming . . . there's no saying what mischief he may not do. Don't you see?"

"Mischief possibly to his own brother," said Miss Jemima.

"Ah. But I am not at all so sure that the mischief would stop there," said the farmer, whose look and tone gave indications of much uneasiness.

"You mean that all the work of our lives might be undone that Charles might be defrauded—turned out of his birthright. Yes, it is his birthright—the right of being fit by nature for what the other is not fitted for. There's no right equal to the right of nature's giving," said the lady.

"And after all our hopes, and toils, that would be bad enough. If ever any planning was justified by the result, ours has been justified. Look at the two boys. Can anybody say that each of them is not best off in the place he is. Think of Charlie dependent on his brother," said the farmer.

"And think of Peter *not* dependent on his brother. Why, he would be lost. It's as much for Peter's happiness every bit as it is for Charlie's. And all to be put out, and put wrong by a parcel of stupid blundering meddling. I've no patience to think of it," said Miss Jemima, crossing as she spoke one knee over the other, and throwing herself back in her chair.

"Provoking enough. Bad enough. But there might be worse behind worse, if he goes routing about till all the

world is let into the secret," said Mr. Cornland, with a gloomy frown.

"Worse! what worse? You don't mean to say . . . why isn't it plain that the first to get into—into any botheration would be Ikey Batt, his brother. He can't want that," said his sister.

"No, I don't suppose he would want that . . . if he knew what he was about . . . specially as there would be nothing to stop him from doing what he thought fit about my brother's money," remarked Mr. Cornland, looking questioningly into his sister's face.

"How do you mean?" said Miss Jemima, with a short, sharp glance at her brother.

"Why, if he knew what he was doing, he would not run the risk of ruining his brother, by bothering any more about these cursed certificates. But then, to put him up to that, would be to let him into the secret of the real state of the case with regard to the boys. And if he *was* let into the secret, he might still do as he thought fit about the money," said Mr. Cornland, speaking slowly.

"And what do you suppose he *would* do?" enquired his sister.

“That’s just what it is impossible to say, and very difficult to find out. People’s ideas and views are so different. Suppose he knew that—knew the facts as they are, he might content himself with saying, Peter ought by rights to have had his mother’s fortune of ten thousand pounds; but since he won’t get it, he shall have his uncle’s twenty thousand pounds. Or he might understand that the money ought to be kept together that a man naturally wishes to make his descendants something better in the country than his forefathers were that my brother would probably have wished that his money should further such an object and that all is best as it is. Or he might take it into his head to say that it is all very well to make an eldest son, but that—the one that chanced to come into the world first should *be* that eldest,” said the farmer, nodding at his sister.

“What! Give Peter all the Stanton money, and your brother’s twenty thousand, and leave Charlie dependent on him! Never, never, while I live to see it!” said Miss Jemima, with great decision.

"But how are you to help it, if this man insists? And with this notion about the certificates that he has taken into his head, I don't see how the truth can be kept from him. If we tell him the real truth . . . "

"Tell him!" exclaimed Miss Jemima, suddenly springing into a bolt upright position in her chair, with her two hands on the arms of it.

"Well, what would you have? If we don't tell him, he'll go bothering on with this lawyer till we shall be in a very disagreeable mess, and will be in a position to have his own way after all. If we do tell him, at least there will be no further bother about the certificates; and he may do what is reasonable about the money, don't you see?" said the farmer.

"Then you *really* think of telling him?" said Miss Jemima.

"Upon my word I'm coming to think that would be the best thing to do," said her brother.

"And if he then insists upon it that Peter shall be recognized as the eldest son?" asked Miss Jemima, with wide eyes.

"There would be no help for it, but to submit. Bad enough. But it would be very far less bad than having any question about the certificates. We should say that we had judged it best for the boys not to bring up Peter with the knowledge that he had a competency waiting for him. And, any way, Charlie would have what we have to leave, you know."


"Oh, brother, can you make up your mind to this," said Miss Jemima, clasping her hands, "after all we have done?"

"I see no better way. It may be that Batt will take a rational view of the matter, and act with us. Let us hope so. Any way, something must be done before he goes up to London again to see this lawyer."

And with that the farmer left his sister's room, and betook himself to a solitary walk up and down the gravel walk, that led from the porch to the gate into the park.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS.

 HE two Ben Batts, father and son, walked that evening, as they purposed to do, over to Petheram, to hear such tidings as they could gather from "Doctor" Granger. The tidings had little that was new, and nothing that was good in them. Mr. Granger told them that he had been obliged to tell Mrs. Frampton that there was no hope of saving the lives of either of the twins. He did not expect that either of them would live through the night. With regard to Miss Penelope, there was no immediate danger. The doctor had good hope, indeed, that he might be justified in saying that the young lady was not in any danger.

It was true that she was suffering from a very violent attack of the malady ; but her constitution was so good, and there was so elastic a power of reaction, that he had little doubt but that she would pull through. Miss Beatrice was well, and was bearing up bravely. Mr. Granger, in the whole course of his long experience, had never seen a more devoted nurse, and very few indeed, who could, under any circumstances, have been capable of going through the amount of labour—watching, anxiety, and want of rest—which she had borne up against. The doctor wound up his eulogium by declaring that Miss Beatrice was a “none-such,” with such enthusiasm, that his words had the singular effect of bringing the tears into young Ben’s eyes—a phenomenon which did not escape the doctor’s shrewd observation.

As to risk, . . . well, Mr. Granger could not say that Miss Beatrice was not still and continuously exposed to a certain degree of risk ; but he confidently hoped that she would escape it ; he was “disposed to think” that the probabilities were in her favour, and that

if she had been susceptible of the malady, it would have declared itself before now.

Upon the whole, the news was good ; for the inquirers had come with very little or no hope of any better tidings with regard to the poor twins ; and the father and son thanked the doctor for his trouble and took their leave. At the door, to which Mr. Granger, still speaking, accompanied them, Mr. Batt hung back a moment behind his son, to ask the medical man in an under voice whether it was probable that Miss Penelope would be *marked* ? There was something in the manner of the query that caused Mr. Granger to cast a short, shrewd glance on Mr. Batt's face as he replied that it was too soon as yet to form any sure opinion on that point, but he feared it was not unlikely that she might be. But Mr. Batt only nodded his head as he said, "Thank 'ee, doctor ; I see, I see," and Granger learned nothing from his look, shrewd as it may have been.

"What was it you were saying to the doctor at the door ?" asked Ben, as they began their walk back to the farm-house.

Mr. Batt made no reply for a minute or so,

but at the end of that time said, "I was asking him whether Miss Penelope would be marked by the disease. He says he fears she may be."

"Poor Miss Pen! I don't suppose she'll like that; but if that could be the extent of the mischief, one would compound for that. It don't so much matter for her, you know, as it would for one of the others. I wish Miss Barbara could have it instead, though, with all my heart. Wouldn't it serve her right?" said young Ben.

Again Mr. Batt was silent for awhile before he replied, "No, it don't so much matter, I suppose."

And then the father and son walked the best part of their way to the farm in silence.

The next morning Mr. Batt said, at breakfast, that he was going to pay another visit to his old friend, Lady Cartershaw; while his son went, as he did every morning since the misfortune had fallen upon the Stillwinches, up to the hall. Mr. Batt's business at the house of Mrs. Nisbett was in reality to comfort little Maggie with the well-founded hope that her Augustus' mamma would not be found to

offer any further opposition to his marriage with a daughter of the house of Stilwinche. He felt as if it were cruel to leave the poor girl to eat her heart out, while he possessed the knowledge that her sorrow was uncalled for. But when he reached his destination, the first thing he heard was that tidings had reached the house from Combe Hall, not half an hour ago, to the effect that both the twins had died in the course of the night. And, of course, neither Margaret nor Millicent were visible.

After a little chat with Lady Cartershaw, in the course of which Mr. Batt endeavoured to extract from the good lady the results of her experiences in life as to the probability of people remaining disfigured by the small-pox, and the extent of disfiguration that might be expected, he took his leave, and, since he had been unable to do his errand of benevolence to Maggie, determined that he would walk over to Whitton and say a word or two to the same effect to the despairing lover.

It wanted about an hour to luncheon time at Mr. Alleyne's vicarage when Mr. Batt

reached it, and Augustus ought to have been at that hour in the study "getting his education," as his lady mother phrased it; but instead of that Mr. Batt found him with Miss Alleyne on the shrubbery-surrounded lawn, and evidently in such a state of high spirits that book-work had on that morning been impossible. There was a huge young Newfoundland puppy at Coppleford farm, who sometimes would strive with all sorts of gambols to entice a quiet little white cat of Miss Jemima's to play with him. Pussy was not in the least afraid of him, but would sit in the sunshine placidly watching her big friend's obstreperous boundings, and rollings, and barkings; and Mr. Batt was strongly reminded of this pair of friends by the little lady and Augustus on the lawn before him. She was sitting on a garden bench, while he, calling to her not to move, and not to be the least bit frightened, was preparing for a flying leap over the high back of the seat.

On seeing Mr. Batt he turned at once to meet him, and, shaking hands with him violently, proceeded to introduce him to Miss Alleyne.

"You are hardly likely to have known, I suppose, when I met you at the hall, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that I was an old acquaintance of your mother's?" said Mr. Batt, after making his bow to the lady.

"No. You don't mean it? Why don't you go and see her over at Gilling's farm here?" said Augustus, evidently in high spirits.

"I have been to see her. I am glad to find her so well. And, to tell the truth, my visit here this morning was for the purpose of telling you something we were talking about," said Mr. Batt, a little taken aback by the evident high spirits of the young man; for Mr. Batt's errand had been undertaken in the view of his supposed broken-hearted condition.

What, if after all, the young gentleman was no such constant lover. Mr. Batt began to think that it was, perhaps, just as well that he had not found an opportunity of hinting to Maggie, that all was likely to go well between her and her lover.

"No, you don't say so! Well, sir, I am sure I shall be very happy I I am quite"

"If this lady,—Miss Alleyne, I presume?" said Mr. Batt, bowing low to the vicar's sister.

"I beg pardon! I forgot that you did not know Miss Alleyne . . . Miss Alleyne—Mr. Batt," said Augustus.

Miss Alleyne made a graceful little curtsy, and timidly put out a tiny little white hand, which Mr. Batt very cordially enveloped in his huge brown paw.

"If you will excuse the liberty, miss," said Mr. Batt, "I should like to speak a few words to this young gentleman."

"Certainly, sir. Would you like to walk into the house?" said the little lady, turning towards it.

"Thanking you, miss, all the same, for your civility, I think we might as well,—Mr. Fitzwilliam and me—take a turn here in this pretty garden, with your kind permission," returned Mr. Batt.

"By all means, sir," said Miss Alleyne, with another curtsy to the stranger, as she left them to go into the house.

Augustus was evidently ill at ease as to the nature of the communication he was about to

receive from Mr. Batt. An old acquaintance of his mother's! He could not help feeling some misgiving as to what might be in store for him.

Mr. Batt, as soon as he had made his bow to the retiring lady, took him familiarly by the arm, and turning into one of the neatly gravelled walks of the little garden, thus began his errand:

"Yes, Mr. Fitzwilliam, as I was a saying, your mother and I are old acquaintances. We've known each other many years, and when—when things was very different. And I've been having a talk with her about old times—likewise about things here now. Charming family of girls, your neighbours over at Combe Mavis," said Mr. Batt, with a somewhat sudden transition, after the manner of a dog, who having for some time prowled around a bevy of fowls, making stealthy approaches to them, suddenly, with a sharp turn, dashes in among them.

"Yes," said Augustus, colouring, "very much so—particularly so—if they hadn't the small-pox."

"Ah, poor things! Sad business, very

sad! And the news of the two poor girls attacked,—have you heard?—they both went off last night,” said Mr. Batt.

“What you mean dead?” said Augustus, hesitatingly.

Mr. Batt nodded his head gravely.

“Poor girls! poor girls!” sighed Augustus.

“But I have just been at Mrs. Nisbett’s, and the two young ladies there are, I am happy to say, quite well.”

Augustus coloured up to the roots of his hair, but said nothing.

“Am I right in supposing, Mr. Fitzwilliam, that your interest in the family is mainly centred on that part of it which is, happily, out of harm’s way, at Mrs. Nisbett’s house?” said Mr. Batt.

“Well, I don’t know about that I I I” stammered Augustus, feeling a little nettled at the nature of the catechism he was being put through.

“Come now, young gentleman, I speak as an old friend—an old friend of your mother’s, who knew her before you were born, or thought of her; and who has been wishful to do you a good turn. What’s the good of beating about

the bush? You went and engaged yourself to that sweet girl, Miss Margaret Stilwinche. Is not that so?" said Mr. Batt.

"Well, if you want to know—and I'm sure all the world may know for me—I am engaged to her, and I mean to marry her, too,—that's more!" said Augustus,

"But I was given to understand that my old friend, your mother, strongly objected to the match," returned Mr. Batt.

"Well, perhaps she did object at first; but she don't object now. She is all in favour of it," said Augustus, triumphantly.

"I am very glad to hear it. What made her change her mind, and when did she change it? I ask as the oldest friend she has in the world, you know," said Mr. Batt.

"Well, it was this very morning; she told me that she had thought better of it, and would not any further oppose my marriage with Maggie. As for why she changed her mind, she said she had hoped to see me marry differently, but that if my heart was set upon it, she could not bear to make me unhappy. She is the best mother a fellow ever had, Mr. Batt."

"Well, that's all right. I'm very glad to hear it; and I congratulate you with all my heart," said Mr. Batt, stretching out his hand, which the young man grasped cordially. "And now I think, if I were you," continued he, "I would go over to Mrs. Nisbett's, and have it all out with the young lady. To tell you the truth, I went there this morning, meaning to tell her that it would be all right between you and her—only I could not well see her, and her sisters lying dead, you know."

"You, Mr. Batt! *You* went to tell her! Why why, it was only this morning that my mother told me!" said Augustus, in great astonishment.

"Ah, but she told me first. We are such old friends, you see. But I'd go over and see Miss Maggie, if I were you," rejoined Mr. Batt.

"Won't I? Of course I will! You would have found me gone, if you had come half an hour later," cried Augustus.

"Remember, you know," said Mr. Batt, laying his hand upon the young man's shoulder, and looking with kindly earnestness into his eyes; "remember, in the midst of your own

—and no doubt her—rejoicings, that she has just lost two sisters, poor girl.”

“Yes, of course,” returned Augustus, with a sigh. “Will you come into the house?”

“No thank you; not now. I must go back to Copleford. There is another of those poor girls down with the disease. Did you hear of it?” said Mr. Batt, sadly.

“No! Not Beatrice?” cried Augustus.


“No! Miss Penelope has taken it,” returned Ben, casting down his eyes.

“Poor Miss Pen. But I’m glad it’s not Beatrice; and I think I know somebody else who is glad too. Give my love to the boys at Copleford, and tell Ben that I have steered my craft into port,” said Augustus.

Mr. Batt nodded his leave-taking, and started on his walk back to the farm-house.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAT IS OUT OF THE BAG.

HEN Mr. Batt reached the farm, just as he turned in at the gate from the park, which has been so often mentioned, he saw a figure, which he recognised to be that of his nephew Ikey, in the act of vanishing round the further corner of the house in company with a lady, who was, he thought, a stranger to him. The circumstance was not one of any interest to him, but on going into the house he heard that Miss Pernel had walked over from the Vicarage to see her sister Barbara, on the death of the twins having become known to her; and he then felt sure that after her interview with her sister, Miss Pernel had sought, or

been led into, one with his nephew. There was little interest in this fact for Mr. Batt in any way, but he would have been amused not a little if he could have known exactly the subject and nature of his nephew's colloquy with the lady. The mutual confidences which Miss Pernel and Ikey had been led into making to each other at a very early period of their acquaintanceship, had altogether failed to produce the effect which either party had intended to bring about by them; and circumstances had arisen to make both the lady and the gentleman wish that they had been less in a hurry to make them. Certain words and hints had dropped from Mrs. Frampton during the period of the sickness at the hall, which led Miss Pernel to feel that it would be very highly imprudent to allow any faintest whisper of a presumption on her part that she would eventually be found to be her aunt's heiress. And on the other hand Mr. Ikey Batt had received from his excellent father in the Isle of Man a letter which caused him to regret exceedingly the imprudence he had committed in allowing Miss Pernel to become aware of the means he held in his hand of proving

Peter Cornland to be the elder, and not, as was generally supposed, the younger of the two brothers.

With regard, on the other hand, to the schemes which these mutual confidences had been intended to forward, Mr. Batt began to fear that he would not be able to venture on the steps he had contemplated with a view to restoring Peter to his birthright, and that the hope of making profit out of an alliance between him and Miss Pernel was futile, from the lady's absolute inability to extract from "poor" Peter the smallest ray of encouragement. The lady, on her side, recognising the undeniable certainty of this last fact, was not indisposed to fall back on the hopes which she supposed her confidences might have inspired in the gentle breast of Mr. Ikey Batt. But that gentleman had had, according to his wont, his eyes and ears too widely opened during his stay in the neighbourhood, not to have conceived some suspicions of the accuracy of the representations Miss Pernel had made to him. The conversation between them had thus been a very pretty fencing match, at which both parties had

shown themselves to be very creditable performers.

The fact, as far as Ikey was concerned was, that his father, having been exceedingly alarmed by hearing that inquiry had been made about the baptismal certificates of the young Cornlands, though he was not at all aware of the person in London on whose behalf the inquiries had been made, had written him a most pressing letter, imploring him not to dream of making any use of the paper he had in his possession, and setting forth the strong probability there was that if he neglected his father's wishes and prayers in this respect, such terrible consequences might ensue, as would by no means leave him, Ikey, scatheless. Miss Pernel's position, indeed, was not changed from what it had been when she and Ikey first laid their heads together, save in that she had assured herself that it was of no use to lay siege to poor Peter. As to her aunt's utterances, her own true persuasion was, that very little of the old lady's real intentions were to be learnt from them. But it was certainly true that the death of two out of the six unprovided-for sisters im-

proved proportionably the chances of the survivors. And then it was not at all clear to Miss Pernel, that if it really were true or probable that she would be her aunt's heiress, Mr. Ikey Batt was at all worth thinking of.

In the course of the afternoon Mr. Batt took occasion to mention to Mr. Cornland his intention of running up to town in the morning for the purpose of having another interview with Mr. Sylvester. He wanted, he said, to give the lawyer some instructions respecting matters connected with his own property, and at the same time to speak to him about what was best to be done further in the matter of the so strangely missing certificates.

Then Mr. Cornland perceived that the communication he had contemplated making to his guest must be made then or never. He had never encountered anything so painful to him in his life, as was the making of the confession that lay before him. He had always stood so fairly before the world, especially with regard to this man, to whom it was necessary to confess himself; he had from boyhood upwards

held his head so high, and had confessedly occupied a position so far superior in all respects, that it made the task before him very specially difficult and disagreeable. Yet it had become perfectly clear to him that it had to be done. It was impossible to allow legal inquiries to be pushed on till the truth should be discovered publicly, and the wrong that had been done made known to all the world. No, there was no avoiding it; he must make a clean breast of it, and then must submit to the course, as regarded the boys, which it might please Mr. Benjamin, the son of his father's old clerk, to impose upon him. He must do this; . . . and he must do it at once.

"There was a matter I wanted to speak to you upon, Mr. Batt," said Mr. Cornland, swallowing a great gulp, and making a strong effort to speak not only calmly but cheerfully, as he put his arm within that of Mr. Batt, "and as there is half an hour before tea-time, and you are going to be away to-morrow, I will take the present opportunity if you will give me your attention."

"To be sure, Mr. Cornland, to be sure, sir.

I was going to stroll towards the hall to meet Ben, who has gone up, and will be coming back to tea; but I shall see him when he comes, or we can walk together to meet him."

"No, don't let us go to meet him; I want to speak to you by ourselves, and if we go to meet him, we shall be interrupted."

"As you like; I'll go in any direction," returned Mr. Batt, wondering not a little what could be the nature of the farmer's communication, which was to be of such a nature that it could brook no interruption.

"About these boys of mine," began the farmer, "I wanted to consult you. You see what the boys are, how different they are; how fitted Charlie is to make, I may say, some figure in the world, and how unfitted Peter is to be anything except dependent on him."

"Well, I don't know; Charlie is the better looking fellow, no doubt,—he has more of a stand up way with him, but I doubt whether he has any better brains in his head than Peter," said Mr. Batt.

"Humph! I am not sure about that. I

am sure it would be quite compatible with his happiness to be dependent upon Charlie, and that it would be out of the question to expect that Charlie should be contented to be dependent upon him, and that you may judge as you see them now. But the fact is that it was much more strongly the case when they were little children," said the farmer.

"How do you mean?" said Ben Batt, doubtfully. He was far enough from guessing what it was the farmer had to tell him; but he had a strong idea that Cornland was about to try and prejudice him in favour of Charles and against Peter, with a view to the disposal of John Cornland's twenty thousand pounds.

"Why they were born so," returned Cornland; "and not only so, but we never thought that Peter would have lived at all, he was so puny and weak. We made sure that we should lose him. But Charlie was as fine a baby as ever was seen. There never was such a difference."

"Charlie, you think, was more fitted to take care of himself, and make his own way in the world?" said his companion.

"Well," returned the farmer, with some embarrassment and hesitation, for he saw that Mr. Batt's remark pointed in a direction diametrically opposed to the aim and object of his own observations; "Well, I don't know about that . . . Fitted to take care of himself? Yes, and of his brother too. Fitted to be the head of the family, you know. Fitted to stand foremost—to be the elder in short," said the farmer, with an anxious sidelong glance into Mr. Batt's face.

"Well; if so be as that was the case, it was lucky that he came first and *was* the eldest. Those sort o' things oftentimes don't turn up so much to our liking," rejoined Mr. Batt.

"And then what a pity it is. What a mischief it is to all the parties concerned. It has always seemed to me, that when there's more boys than one in a family, the parents ought to have the right to consider which they please as the representative of the family," said Mr. Cornland, still observing his friend's face carefully.

"Well, so they may consider what they please. I don't know that I can see that

there's any sense much in setting more store on the eldest than on any one of the others. If I had a dozen boys, as I have but one, they'd be all alike to me. But then in your case it didn't depend on you. Old Stanton took it out of your hands, and willed it that his money should go to the eldest, you know?" said Mr. Batt.

"Yes, and how well he got laughed at and blamed by everybody for his pains. Don't you remember? My opinion is that the old man was doting, and had no business to tie up his money as he did," continued Mr. Cornland.

"Yes, I remember he *was* laughed at. As for doting, I take it he knew what he wanted; and a man, you know, may do what he likes with his own, specially when he has earned it," said Mr. Batt, in the careless tone of a man who seemed to think that the discussion was straying into points of no interest.

"Well, yes, to be sure he may—in a sense. And if the old man had seen those two boys, there can be no doubt in the world which of the two he would have left his money to, seeing that it's quite clear he wanted to make

his daughter's child somebody in the world. No doubt at all, I should say," argued Mr. Cornland.

"Which of them, then?" asked Mr. Batt, innocently.

"Why, how can you ask? How can any man doubt? To Charlie, to be sure. Why his object was that his money should go to some one that would . . . do credit to it. He would have been regularly sold, if, looking at those two boys, he had seen his money go to Peter instead of to Charles," continued the farmer.

"Maybe he would, and maybe he wouldn't! What can one tell?" said Mr. Batt, beginning to feel a little surprised at the line of the farmer's talk.

"I thought there could be no doubt about it, and so . . . when I saw the two boys . . . as I tell you they were . . . why poor little Peter was such a weakling that, putting it off, and putting it off, we had never had him baptized, till the other one was baptized at the same time. I am sure Charlie looked the bigger fellow of the two even then . . . and so we just decided that he should be

brought up as the eldest," said the farmer, dropping his eyes to the ground as he finished speaking.

"Why, you don't mean to say that Peter was the first born of the two?" said Mr. Batt, staring at him in great astonishment

"He was so," said Cornland, gravely nodding his head, and dropping his voice almost to a whisper.

"And was he registered as the youngest?" asked Mr. Batt.

"No; he could not well be. It was known to too many which really was born first," answered the farmer, still speaking almost in a whisper.

"And how is it that the register has not been found?" asked Mr. Batt, still in great astonishment.

"Why that was your brother's doing as a good turn for an old friend, you know to make all right he just took the entries out of the register," said Mr. Cornland, trying hard to speak in an easy and unconcerned manner.

"But, God bless my soul, Mr. Cornland, it seems to me that it was making it all wrong,

instead of all right. What, take an entry out of the parish register! Why it's burglary, or larceny, or arson, or some dreadful thing or another, I am sure it is," said Mr. Batt, in much trouble and perplexity.

"No, no, nothing of the sort. And you see . . . there was no need to have troubled you with all this . . . it's all between me and your brother Ikey, don't you see . . . only that . . . it was your making enquiry about the register, you see . . . that . . . made it better . . . you understand . . . that you should know all about it," said Mr. Cornland, bringing his confession to an end with no little difficulty.

"Don't you think so?" added Mr. Cornland after a long pause, during which his companion said never a word. For the fact was that Mr. Batt was so taken aback by the information he had just received, that he needed some little time to take the matter into his mind in all its bearings. And in truth he was not so much thinking what he should then say to the farmer, as what he should himself do in the matter, and how far his own duties might

be modified by this new aspect of the circumstances of the case.

"Eh, yes, I suppose so. Yes . . . of course I am glad to know how the matter really stands," said Mr. Batt, again relapsing into silence and perplexed meditation.

"Because, you see," continued Mr. Cornland, after another long pause, "there will now be no necessity for saying anything more to Mr. Sylvester about the certificates."

"Of course if the entries have been removed from the register, there is no use in trying to get them *from* the register. But—I am afraid, Mr. Cornland, that you have . . . made a great mistake in . . . taking this step," said Mr. Batt slowly.

"Why a mistake? Don't you think yourself that Charlie is far more fitted to take the place of elder brother?" urged the farmer.

"Humph! I don't know that that is so certain. But anyway that is not the question. Charlie was *not* the eldest son. Old Mr. Stanton said that his money should go to the eldest. I don't think that the matter can be left as it stands," said Mr. Batt, biting his nails in much perplexity.

"What does it seem to you ought to be done, then? You would not do anything that would get your brother into trouble, I suppose?" said Mr. Cornland, doubtfully.

"In course I don't want to make trouble either to you or to him, Mr. Cornland. It is not likely. And what you and he have done is no business of mine. Leastways it is my business to know the real truth about the boys, because I've got my own duty to perform as to their uncle's money; but when I know that, the rest of it is no business of mine," said Mr. Batt.

"But what should you think it right to do about the money under the circumstances?" asked the farmer.

"Ah! that needs some thinking about. I don't know yet what I should do. My notion is, the boys ought to be told the truth," said Mr. Batt, speaking with much decision of manner.

"But suppose suppose we that is, I and my sister, thought it, on the whole best not to say anything on the subject to the boys. Should you eh? should you consider it your duty to let the secret out to

them, Mr. Batt?" asked the farmer, eyeing his companion wistfully.

"Well, there again, I don't know. I can't say. It needs a deal o' thinking. But I tell you fairly my present notion is, that I should find myself sooner or later obliged to do so," said Mr. Batt.


"Anyway," said the farmer, "you'll promise me not to say a word to them about it without telling me first?"

"Yes, I'll promise you that; and I'll promise you not to meddle with the matter at all if you'll tell them yourself," said Mr. Batt.

And then the conversation came to a close.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WINNING HORSE.

HE more Mr. Batt turned the disagreeable subject of his conversation with the farmer over in his mind, the more he felt that, as he had said to Mr. Cornland on the first blush of the matter, that it needed thinking of a great deal of thinking of. What would it be best for him to do? What ought he to do in the matter? How far would he be justified in considering the rights of the question no affair of his, except in so far as concerned the disposition of John Cornland's money, which, of course, he could regulate as he pleased in view of what had been wrongly done as regarded the really elder boy? Of course it might have been the wish of John Cornland that the whole of

his twenty thousand pounds should go to the same person who inherited old Stanton's ten thousand. There are people—very many—who would wish so to dispose of their property, but such was not Benjamin Batt's feeling, and, to the best of his belief, such would not have been the intention of the man whose presumable wishes he was morally bound to carry out. John Cornland had been one of those who had most loudly blamed the disposition of the settlement dictated by old Stanton, which gave the whole of his money to his eldest grandchild. And it had been Mr. Batt's intention, in the disposal of John Cornland's money, to remedy the hardship which he thought had been thus done. His idea of asking for the certificates of the boys' baptisms had been dictated only by the earnest desire of a man who felt that he had a weighty responsibility laid upon him of a kind to which he was entirely a stranger, to do all in the most orderly and regular manner, to make it all ship-shape, as he himself would have said. He almost wished now that he had made no such inquiry.

Of course, by simply adjudging fifteen thou-

sand pounds of John Cornland's money to Peter, and five thousand to Charles, he could make things equal between them as far as money provision went. But then that was not everything. Could he content himself with acquiescing in the wrongful deposition of Peter from his proper place? Again and again he told himself that he had no business with the boys at all, save as concerned the distribution of their uncle's money; and he could be guided in this by the knowledge of the facts that had been communicated to him without taking it upon himself to insist on the remedying of the wrong which had been done. But then, again, came across him the consideration, that by holding his peace he was assisting in the commission of the wrong. Yes, the difficulty needed a deal of thinking—more, Mr. Batt found, than could be got done very quickly.

Meantime he determined to make his journey to town as he had intended. Mr. Cornland, evidently uneasy, found an opportunity to ask him before he started for Petheram whether his journey had any reference to the matter of the non-forthcoming certificates; and Mr. Batt had answered shortly, and with almost

as much embarrassment as marked the manner of the farmer, that his business in town had no connection with that matter—that he should tell Mr. Sylvester that he had obtained the information he needed, and that it was unnecessary to make any further search or inquiry about the extracts from the register. Mr. Batt was starting on his short journey in a happier frame of mind than he had hoped, for news came from the hall that morning that Miss Stilwinche was going on very favourably, the disease was taking its normal course, and Mr. Granger had said that he was for the present under no apprehension as to the result.

On reaching London Mr. Batt hastened at once to Symonds' Inn, and finding Mr. Sylvester in his accustomed place, proceeded to give him certain instructions respecting the investment of a certain sum of money; and then, briefly saying that, by-the-bye he had now all the information he required about Charles Cornland's sons, and need not trouble Mr. Sylvester's correspondent with any further enquiries upon the subject, at once passed on to ask his old friend sundry questions having reference to the usual way in which marriage

settlements were drawn, and the ordinary provisions of them under such and such circumstances—queries which produced such an amount of bantering and “chaffing” from the old bachelor-lawyer, that no further thought was given to the matter of the certificates.

But Mr. Batt had been thinking of the matter all the way up to town, and he continued to think of it all the way back to Petheram. But when he reached the farmhouse, in the evening, he had not come a bit nearer to a determination than he had when he started in the morning. And in this state of uncertainty and perplexity he remained for several days.

In the meantime, the news from the hall continued to be good. Beatrice was perfectly well, and had borne up against the immense amount of fatigue she had gone through, wonderfully. With regard to Penelope, too, the news was good—good at least so far as that all danger to life might fairly be hoped to be at an end. *But* poor Pen would be *marked*. Mr. Batt heard the news, and it cannot be denied that some thoughts of it would frequently draw his mind from the

consideration of the great difficulty, to the solution of which he was striving to bend it. But after the first twelve hours from the time the doctor's dictum was known at Coppelford, had elapsed, Mr. Batt had quite recovered his usual elasticity of spirits and manner.

A change, too, during these same days, seemed to come o'er the dream of Miss Barbara, whose stay at the farm was necessarily prolonged by the continued illness of her eldest sister—a change which afforded considerable amusement to those inmates of the farm house, whose minds were not so much engrossed by their own affairs as to be prevented from watching her, and was productive of no small measure of relief to “poor” Peter.

It had become known to all the party collected beneath the roof of the farmer of Coppelford, that Mrs. Fitzwilliam did not intend to offer any further opposition to the loves of Augustus and Maggie. And nobody felt any doubt that this was equivalent to a satisfactory *dénouement* of *their* little romance. Nor did either Charlie Cornland or Ben Batt affect any secrecy respecting their hopes with regard to Beatrice and Millicent. Mr Batt senior, it

is true, was more reticent as regarded any hopes or intentions he might have conceived with reference to Miss Pen. Nevertheless, strong suspicions on that head were rife among the inmates of the house. Now all this together produced a state of things which was rapidly becoming wholly intolerable to Miss Barbara.

Here were four out of her five now remaining sisters, either engaged, or in all probability shortly to be engaged to be married. And she, the beauty, the irresistible, the fine flower of the flock, without so much as the most distant shadow of a candidate for her heart or hand. Could such things be? To say that she would have revelled in strangling Miss Pen, and Miss Beatrice, and Miss Margaret, and Miss Millicent, and their respective lovers, signifies little. It was out of her power to apply any such remedy to the calamitous circumstances of the case. What was she to do? What could she do? What she could attempt she had already attempted with an energy that deserved success, but with a want of it that turned her blood to gall, and every moment of her day, and thought of her brain to bitterness.

She had pushed her efforts to the very limits of the possible in her attempt to detach Charles Cornland from Millicent. And the failure (aided in some degree, as has been seen, by Mr. Batt's remonstrances) had been signal. She had then turned her attention to Peter, and the absolute futility of the attempt had been even yet more disgusting and mortifying. Charles, at least, had manifested some sense of her personal attractions,—had been not unwilling to flirt with her up to a certain point. But Peter; she might as well have attempted to make love to an archbishop, or an oyster. For "poor" Peter was one of those who could not love with the eye alone. And the moral nature, to which those snaky ringlets, and fair skin, and lithe form, and slender feet were attached, made even the beauties of her person repulsive to him.

She had even made, in her desperation, some demonstrations of attack on the farmer himself. But it was extremely difficult for her to get at him when alone. And the two or three skilful but yet all too palpable indications of attack on that fortress had been met with such utter insensibility to her purpose

by the gentleman himself, together with such very unpleasant and menacing counter-demonstrations on the part of Miss Jemima, that the idea had to be abandoned.

Still there was one hope, or, rather, one possibility remaining. Ikey Batt still remained undrawn in the wheel. He was ugly and he was a snob. He was such a snob that Barbara knew that he was one, though her heart and intelligence were not such as to make it possible for her to know how ignoble and how great a snob he was. But he was of the masculine gender, unmarried, and, as was whispered, though devoid of good, by no means unprovided with goods.

So Barbara, in the desperation of her determination not to be left on the stem, decided that Ikey should be the happy man of her choice. And it so happened that a chance circumstance played into her hand at this last cast of the net, without which her fishing would have been, at the very least, as hopeless as in her previous attempts.

The circumstance was shortly this. Ikey had been calling on Miss Pernel, at the vicarage, and had accompanied her in a walk

towards the hall across the park. In the neighbourhood of the house they fell in with Mrs. Frampton taking a solitary stroll. She had equalled either Pen or Beatrice in the untiring assiduity of attention on her suffering nieces, and had escaped from the sick room for a brief space, to get a little of the respite and fresh air that she so much needed.

Were it not that our space is rapidly waning, it might have been worth while to give a report of the conversation that followed, for it was a very perfect specimen of the bitterest vein of Mrs. Frampton's caustic manner. Very naturally, she was not in a humour to feel very cordially towards those two of her nieces, who had chosen to run from the house of sickness and sorrow, while their sisters had elected to share those labours and dangers which certainly came more directly in their path of duty than in their aunt's. Neither the present Pernel nor the absent Barbara were spared. And in the bitterness of her feeling Mrs. Frampton was led, as she very rarely was, to make allusions and drop hints as to the probable disposal of the eight hundred a-year or thereabouts which she had to leave. But all

this was said in a tone that the reader, it is hoped—would have understood better than Mr. Ikey Batt did. The reader, who has kindly made acquaintance with Mrs. Frampton in the earlier portion of this narrative, knows that that lady affected to a very marked degree the use of the figure of speech called irony. She was very apt to treat her nieces all round “to ironing,” as Byron called it, but she was always especially lavish of that particular form of treatment to Barbara. Now, Mr. Ikey Batt did not in the smallest degree understand irony; and though carrying away with him the idea that she was a crabbed, cantankerous, and very queer old lady, yet carried away with him also a very *vice versa* sort of impression as to the probabilities of the aunt’s intentions with regard to the disposal of her property, and with regard to “that dear pet of hers, Barbara, whose peculiar fragility and unfitness to struggle with the world or its stern duties, it would be so sweet to her to protect and cherish by the devotion to such an object of the means Providence had placed at her disposal.”


“No, Miss Barbara’s the winning horse after

all. She's to have the old lady's money, and no mistake. Well, one has heard of old ladies, as well as old gentlemen, being taken by a pretty face before now. And then, between two and three hundred a-year of her own ! Humph !"

And so it came to pass that when Barbara decided on opening the trenches for the siege of Mr. Ikey Batt's hand, she found the ground prepared for her.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MISSING DOCUMENT IS FOUND.

T was a day or two after Mr. Batt's return from his second visit to town that his meditations on the difficulties of his position relative to the secret which Mr. Cornland had disclosed to him, had so far resulted in a purpose as to take the shape of a determination to have a conference with his nephew on the subject. It was true that Ikey Batt was personally so distasteful to his uncle that he was the last man whom he would willingly have chosen to consult with in any difficulty; but he considered that it was due to his brother not to accept as admitted fact the assertion that he (the parish-clerk) had been the active

instrument in the falsification of the register, without giving him the opportunity of denying the accusation, if he could do so. He was still doubting what steps he should himself take in the matter, but appeared to himself to be coming more and more nearly to the conclusion that he could not reconcile it to his conscience to acquiesce in the continuance of the deceit which made Charles Cornland consider himself his brother's elder, and Peter believe himself to be the junior; and he was anxious to ascertain how far a determination on his part to have this wrong effectually righted would or might cause trouble to his brother, and if so, of what kind and to what extent it would be likely to do so.

With this object in view, he took his nephew aside one afternoon after the early Copleford dinner, and telling him that he wanted to have a little talk with him, put his arm within Ikey's and led him into the park for a stroll, not at all to his nephew's displeasure, for he was continually tormented by the idea that his rich Australian uncle was escaping away out of the hands of his family, which naturally ought to have the management of him and his

money, and would fain have done anything to increase the closeness of intimacy between himself and Mr. Benjamin, with the effect of lessening it between his uncle and the Cornlands.

"I wanted to have a few words with you, nevvv," began Mr. Batt, "about a matter that Mr. Charles Cornland was mentioning to me the other day, . . . and a very queer and unpleasant matter it was—very unpleasant."

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Ikey drily, with a shrug.

"And as it was a matter," continued Mr. Batt without paying any attention to his nephew's interruption, "which my brother is concerned in, I don't know that I can do better than speak to you about it. I suppose speaking to you is much about the same thing as speaking to your father?" added Mr. Batt, looking up into his nephew's sly face very innocently.

"Oh, dear, yes, quite the same thing. Father and I have no secrets from each other of any kind," said Ikey, chuckling inwardly as he said it, to think how very far the statement was from the truth—though, indeed, as it

happened, it was the truth as regarded the matter on which Ben Batt wanted to speak.

"Of course—of course. Well, you know how I am situated with regard to these Cornland boys; that I've got the dividing between 'em of their uncle's money on my hands. You know that old Mr. Stanton, you know who *he* was, I suppose, nevvv?"

"*I* should think so! I know all about him and the ridiculous settlement he *would* have made on his daughter's marriage," replied Ikey, nodding.

"Very well then. It being so, that the eldest of Charles Cornland's sons was to have all his grandfather's fortune, I wanted naturally to know for certain, how that was to be before I made up my mind about the disposal of my poor friend John Cornland's money, don't you see?"

"Quite so; quite so," replied Ikey, not yet guessing what his uncle was coming to, but already beginning to turn over in his own mind the expediency of informing Mr. Batt of the substitution which had been practised, partly to obtain credit with him for spontaneous information of a fact which he had

little doubt his uncle would end by discovering, and partly moved thereto by the intensity of his hatred to Charles Cornland, and the longing desire to see him hurled down from his place of pride, and subjected to a mortification which Ikey judged would be well-nigh intolerable to him.

"Well now, I was talking of this the other day to our friend Cornland, and what do you think he told me? . . . why, that Peter in reality is the elder of his two boys, and Charles the younger. I never was so taken aback in my life. And its put me into a great quandary and a dozen minds what to do about it."

"It's odd enough, uncle, . . . one of them coincidences that *does* occur in such a way as to make you feel sure that there must be a Providence in such things, . . . that you should have picked out this very afternoon of all others to tell me this," said Ikey, assuming what he meant should resemble a reverential and impressive tone.

"Why what's there odd about this afternoon more than another," said Mr. Batt, staring at his nephew in unfeigned surprise.

"Well, I call it odd . . . so odd that it

must be a Providence . . . that you should tell me this, uncle, the very day and hour that I was a-going to tell it to you. How's you to know that? says you, very justly and very naturally. I never say anything, uncle, without I've got the means of proving it—it's not my way. Now here's the proof that I had made up my mind to tell you of this, this very afternoon," said Ikey, putting his hand into the breast pocket of his coat and taking thence a large pocket-book stuffed with various papers. "There," he continued, selecting one paper from the contents of the pocket book, "I put this in my pocket just before dinner, on purpose to show it to you afterwards: I've been this day or two past a saying to myself, uncle ought to know the truth. It'll never do to let him go and dispose of all that lot of money under the impression that the boy that is really the younger is the elder of the two. It'll never do. I am sure if father was here he would tell him. And I think it's my duty to do it. I always *do* a thing, when I think it's my duty to do it. Make a point of it. And that's how it come about I was a-going to tell you the real truth of this matter this very afternoon.

"Why, *surely*," said Mr. Batt, "this here paper is the very certificate of these boys' baptism, that could not be found, leastways it looks like it to me, . . . that don't know much of the look of such things," said Mr. Batt examining the yellow pale-inked document with much curiosity.

"That's what it is, sir, and no mistake. That's the certificate of the boys' births, feloniously removed from the parish register. And, oh uncle, if you only knew how that there paper has weighed on our hearts, my father's and mine, all these years—a weighing like lead on our hearts, it was, when we carried it about in our pocket-books. And think of the wickedness of that man,—that Charles Cornland, to enveigle a poor man like my father, who always looked up to him, and would ha' done anything he told him to do, to go and commit such a act as this. Before his son was grown up big enough to protect him too. Ah! If it had been when *I* was old enough to know what was what, that paper would have remained in its proper place in the register to the present day. Now when you come to look at Cornland's conduct,

that's what I call wickedness," concluded Ikey, winding up his volubility by driving home to his hearer's mind, that aspect of the matter which he was most anxious to impress upon him.

"Lord bless me! you don't say so," rejoined Mr. Batt, scratching his head with much astonishment and perplexity.

"That's the paper, as you may see for yourself, uncle; and that's the way it was done. Charles Cornland for his own wicked purposes induced my poor father to take it out of the registry book. And he has never ceased to regret it since. But what is the good of regretting when the thing is done?" moralised Ikey.

"Anyway what has been done amiss must be undone," returned his uncle after a long pause of puzzled meditation.

"It would be very hard to bring trouble and disgrace on an unfortunate man, who was inveigled into doing wrong, . . . and that your own brother, uncle," said Ikey with a melancholy whine.

"Maybe," returned Mr. Batt, after another long pause, . . . "maybe this matter can be put straight without hurting anybody. Maybe

this matter can be brought about to give each boy his own rights, and yet let bygones be bygones. I must have a talk about it with Charles Cornland. Any way that must be the first thing."

"Ah! You'll bring his nose to the grindstone. You'll bring his pride down a bit. It'll be rare fun to spoil all the scheming of his life, and make him eat humble pie at the same time," said Ikey, with a twinkle of intense malice in his sharp evil eyes.

"No, it won't be fun at all. What the devil do you mean by *fun*? It'll be the out and out most unpleasantest day's work I ever had to do—and that's saying a goodish deal," returned Mr. Batt turning sharp on his nephew with an indignant glare.

"I . . . I . . . I only meant of course that it would be very gratifying, very, to have right done—of course that is what I meant," stammered Ikey.

"Oh, that's what you meant, is it? It isn't what you said. Now I'm going up to the hall; so we may as well walk different ways," said Mr. Batt unceremoniously turning his back on his nephew.

CHAPTER XXII.

MISS PEN IS WOODED AND WON.

IDINGS had reached Coppelford on the day before Mr. Batt and his nephew had the conversation recorded in the last chapter, to the effect that Miss Stilwinche was now convalescent; and that though it was not considered altogether prudent to recall her younger sisters as yet from Mrs. Nisbett's, she had been permitted to see one or two friends. At the same time it was told that Mr. Granger's provisions had been entirely verified by the event . . . that poor Pen was sadly marked by the fell malady.

Upon receipt of this news Mr. Batt, after much consideration and difficulty in making

up his mind, had determined on going up to the hall the next day to pay a visit to the patient. He had a strong feeling that it was taking rather a strong step to do. But there were motives which spurred him to lose as little time as might be in putting his purpose into execution. He thought not a little—this rough ex-gold-digger—on the feelings and meditations which were likely to be those of a young girl—a young girl, according to Mr. Batt's estimation, of great personal attractiveness—on recovering from such a malady, and finding that she had been sentenced to remain disfigured for the rest of her days. And, though he perhaps would not have deemed himself in the generality of cases a very well fitted person for the administering of consolation under such circumstances, he thought that it was not impossible that what he wished to say to Pen might have some effect in mitigating the pang which the misfortune that had fallen upon her must occasion.

It might have been thought natural under all the circumstances of the case, that Mr. Batt should have given his son the option at least of accompanying him to the hall. He

knew very well how strong was the attraction which drew Ben thither. And under other circumstances he would have had no wish to prevent his son from taking the earliest opportunity of visiting Beatrice. But upon this occasion Mr. Batt had his own reasons for wishing to be alone.

Mr. Batt, when he reached the hall, sent in the servant with his compliments to the ladies ; he had called to enquire after Miss Penelope, and would have great pleasure in paying his respects to her, if he might be permitted to see her. When this message was reported in the little morning room, in which Mrs. Frampton and Beatrice were sitting with the convalescent, Pen, blushing violently, had declared that she could not see Mr. Batt. Mrs. Frampton and Beatrice exchanged glances significantly, and Mrs. Frampton said,—

“ I think, Pen, my dear, you might as well see him. It is disagreeable, I dare say, after being shut up so long. But you must shake that off, you know ; and I don't see why you should not begin with Mr. Batt as well as with anybody else.”

Poor Pen covered her face with her hands

for a few moments, and then looking up, said,—

“ *Very* well, aunt, let him *come* up. Of course I know I must *make* up my mind to it!”

Poor Pen! there were the traces of her old peculiar manner, but she was hardly in any other particular as yet like her former self. Her tone seemed quite wonderfully subdued to those who remembered what it had been. She was very pale, too, and delicate looking, which, advantageously set off by the mourning dress she wore, contrasted strongly, but not perhaps unfavourably, with her former appearance.

Mr. Benjamin was announced, and performed his part of the somewhat difficult meeting admirably. No amount of schooling in lessons of deportment could have taught him so well, as did the instinctive prompting of his own kindly nature, to conduct himself in such sort as to mitigate, to the utmost that the nature of the case would allow, the painful feeling which it was inevitable that poor Pen should be conscious of.

With a side bow to Mrs. Frampton and

Beatrice, he came forward quickly with both hands extended towards the convalescent, and with a cheery smile on his rough bronzed face.

“I am so delighted, my dear Miss Penelope, to see you so far on the road to health. I know I ought to apologize to you and to these ladies for intruding at so early a period ; but I could not resist any longer the temptation of congratulating you on your recovery. Ah, we have all known all about it. We have had constant news from Mr. Granger. But upon my word, your looks give a better account of your progress than he had led us to hope for. When I say ‘us,’ I mean me and Ben. We used to walk over almost every evening to Petheram to catch Mr. Granger, and get his account of you all. Ben always *would* go with me. And it was as much as I could do to prevent his coming with me here this morning. But I thought that one of us at a time was as much as we dare venture on—if you can excuse that much.”

Mr. Batt, it will be seen, was acting the part of a truly good father; In the midst of his own hopes and plans, he was not forgetful

of those of his son. And the above words, specially addressed to their proper scope by a side glance at Beatrice, might be judged, from the bright blush which suddenly covered that young lady's features, to have produced the effect they were intended to produce.

"A very few more days, my dear Miss Stilwinche, will see you again all your friends could wish to see you," added Ben.

A delicate blush had coloured Pen's pale face when Mr. Batt had entered the room. But a much deeper shade of colour flushed it as he said the last words.

"It is very *kind* of you to *say* so," muttered Pen, casting down her fine eyes, which never had looked so large as they did now. The emphasis on her words was in truth due to nothing save her usual habit of speaking in that style; though, as was not unfrequently the case with Pen's utterances, it might have seemed that a special meaning was intended to be conveyed by it.

"That is what we all say, Mr. Batt; and I am very glad that your kind visit gives you the opportunity of confirming it," said Mrs. Frampton.

“Indeed, ma’am, that’s my opinion. I’m a very bad one at paying compliments. I can only say what I really mean. And I do assure you, that for my own part, I think that in a very few days Miss Penelope will look as charming as she always did.”

This was sufficiently plain ; and might have been judged to be too plain, had it not been that all present, including Pen herself, knew right well exactly what meaning honest Ben intended to convey.

Mrs. Frampton understood it so well, that after a little further conversation on general subjects, she thought herself justified in saying to Beatrice, “I think, my dear, that you had better go and sit with your mother a little while, I am sure Mr. Batt will excuse you ;” and then a minute or two later, the good lady recollected that she had some orders to give in the kitchen, and left the room saying that she would return in a few minutes.

Mr. Batt had never at any time of his life been a man slow to recognise and accept the now-or-never-ness of an occasion, and he at once proceeded to put the present one to profit in a very business-like manner. He rose from his chair,

and stepping across to the sofa on which Pen was half sitting half reclining, sat down on it at her feet. Pen, as soon as she saw his intention, seemed to authorize or acquiesce in it by just the slightest gathering to her of the folds of her dress, so as to seem to make room for him.

"I am a plain man, Miss Penelope," began Mr. Batt.

"Well, I don't *know*, Mr. Batt, as men *go* ! I'm sure I *never* heard any *body* but yourself make the remark," said Pen.

"Ah, but I mean plain in my speech," returned Ben, not in the least disconcerted. "I can't say what I've got to say any way but straight forward—never could. Now I've a matter on my mind I want to say to nobody but yourself, Miss Pen. And if you'll excuse my being so bold as to say it out plain, you need not, being weak as you are, say more than just a 'yes' or a 'no' at the end of it. This is what it is : I am a widower, a lone man in the world—shall be more so when my boy Ben marries, as he is minded to do if he can persuade a certain lady to have him. Now I've worked hard—have pretty well done my

work in the world—and done it to good purpose. This is how I stand. I've got forty thousand pounds. I shall give my son Ben twenty thousand on his marriage; so if I should do the same thing myself, I should not hurt him by it. I have, therefore, twenty thousand pounds—no great matter, but enough to live on comfortably—specially with the means I have of putting it to profit. But what's the good of a comfortable income to a lone man? Why not marry, anybody would say? Well, the difficulty is, Miss Pen, that I've never seen a girl I'd marry, except one; and I'm afraid she'd think it a piece of presumption in me to ask her."

Pen, who from an early part of this speech had pretty well known what was coming, had a strong opinion that the lady would not think it at all a piece of presumption. Instead, however, of giving her mind to the propriety of making a fitting reply to Mr. Batt, Pen, with her usual hand-over-head rush-at-it habit of mind, was already passing in rapid review before her mental vision, all the immediate and ulterior consequences of the step, which she perfectly understood her suitor was proposing to her.

"Do you think she would?" said Mr. Batt, getting possession of her hand, which he pressed tenderly as he looked into her eyes with an expression that produced a gentle—a very gentle—return of the pressure.

"But *who* would be able to *manage* cook, and look *after* that *woman* at the dairy, if I,"—and then Miss Pen suddenly remembered that no proposition had been made to her in words to do any thing. "That is I mean you must excuse me for *thinking* of my *household* duties, *instead* of attending to you, Mr. Batt," added Pen, blushing deeply, and this time painfully.

Mr. Batt, however, had perfectly well understood what she was going to say, and had entirely taken the beginning of her reply to him as her answer to him, without in the least adverting to the circumstance, the recollection of which had caused Pen to break off in confusion—*videlicet* that he had made no proposal to her at all. Nor did he suffer himself to be in the least disturbed from that view of their conversation by her sudden breaking off. Pursuing, therefore, his purpose from the point where it had been interrupted,

he continued in a more confidential tone, and with business-like attention, to details, as follows :—

“That’s very true, my dear Miss Stilwinche, and I had not forgotten it in considering in my own mind the proposal I have ventured to make to you.” (He had, in truth, made none; and Pen was on the point of interrupting him with a protest to that effect. She was vexed with herself for having, by her over-hasty assumption, given him an opportunity for thus coolly assuming that he had made her an offer in regular fashion. But it was too late to remedy the matter, and Mr. Batt hurried on.) “You see there are several considerations. And between ourselves, you know, and quite confidentially, we may speak of what concerns other people’s affairs, seeing that they bear on our own.” (*Our own*, thought Pen; has it come to that already; one hardly knows how.) “I don’t know whether you have heard that Mrs. Fitzwilliam withdraws all her opposition to a marriage between your sister Margaret and her son; so, as the young people wish it, I suppose that may be looked on as settled. She is very rich, and they will be very well

off. Then, quite between you and me, my boy Ben flatters himself that he has reason to hope that another of your sisters—you know which—may not refuse to listen to him. He, as I have told you, will have the means of keeping a wife. And a little bird has whispered that another of them might not refuse to make Charlie Cornland a happy man. So you see, my dear Miss Pen, that there is reason to think that there may not be for very long such a large family to need your superintendence.”

“But such an *idea*, Mr. Batt, is so very sudden *and* unexpected,” said Pen, with downcast eyes, but not taking her hand out of his, which he had again taken possession of.

“It might not have come so sudden, you see, if it had not been for your illness. I should have had opportunities all this time to try and persuade you. Not but what I own, that the way you have stood to your colours during this sad time, when some others deserted, has shown me what you are, if I may take the liberty of saying so, and made me more anxious than ever to . . . to . . . hear you say ‘yes!’” concluded Mr. Batt, who

probably had never hesitated before in his life in saying what he wanted.

"But I am not *what* I was *before* my illness," said Pen, blushing deeply, but finding courage, though with some difficulty, to look round at Batt full in the face.

"A thousand times dearer to me! I only see what one may call your order of merit for the noble way in which you did your duty. As God's my judge, Miss Pen, I love and honour you with all my heart. And one word is as good to tell the simple truth in as a thousand. Now look here! Young ladies are sometimes very shy of saying 'yes.' And as you are still an invalid, you know, we'll manage it this way. If you don't say 'no' in two minutes," said Mr. Batt, pulling out his great chronometer as he spoke, "I shall understand that it is to be 'yes.'"

Ben put the watch down on the table before them; Pen shook her head and laughed, but fixed her eyes on the watch; and they sat shoulder to shoulder, he holding her hand in his, with their heads very near together, as they both kept their eyes on the watch.


"That is the *minute* hand, isn't it?" said Pen, almost in a whisper.

“Yes, and it must go round to there a second time. Hold hard!—hold hard! For the love of heaven don’t say a word!”

The second hand sped on, and Ben followed its course with his finger. When it came to the last quarter of the second minute, Pen shook a little, and turned her face a little more away from Mr. Batt’s. Another second or two, and Ben, crying, “Time’s up!—Hurrah!” caught her in his arms, and . . . that was the manner of the wooing and the winning of Miss Penelope.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEEDS MUST WHEN—BEN BATT DRIVES.

HE high spirits in which Mr. Batt returned to the hall were in some degree dashed by the recollection of the unpleasant interview with Mr. Cornland which lay before him. He had, however, made up his mind as to the line he should adopt, and he felt that the sooner the necessary explanation was over the better. On returning from the hall, he had told Ben that he thought he might venture to go and pay a visit to Miss Beatrice on the following morning; and he had very little doubt that—especially when Charlie knew on what errand his friend Ben was bound to the hall—he would also be eager to start on a similar one to Mrs. Nisbett's house

where Millicent still was. Now, it seemed important, for sundry reasons, to Mr. Batt that the talk with the farmer which he proposed to have, and the measures which that conversation might make necessary, should be finally arranged before Charlie should make any offer to Miss Millicent Stilwinche. There was enough in the situation which was disagreeable enough; but such a step as that taken under a false impression of the position of the parties might have the effect of making matters much worse.

With these thoughts in his mind, Mr. Batt, that same evening after supper, told the farmer that, before going to bed, he should like to have a little conversation with him. Cornland had small difficulty in guessing what the subject matter of the proposed parley was to be, and, quietly nodding his head, led the way into his own little sanctum.

"I've been thinking, Mr. Cornland," began Ben, "a good deal about what you told me respecting your boys, . . . and I am afraid that the matter is a worse one than I thought it."

"How worse than you thought it? I told you that we had made up our minds to let the

boy who was fittest to be the eldest pass *as* the eldest," said Cornland, with his eyes on the ground.

"Yes, I know that; but don't you think, sir, that it was ill done to lead a poor man like my brother into doing an act that has never let him have an hour's peace since; an act that has weighed on his conscience ever since; and he a man that, from his position, and for old times' sake, naterally looked up to you?" said Mr. Batt in a tone of grave reproach.

The manner of his address had the effect of rousing the farmer to a different mood of feeling.

"Come, Mr. Batt," he said, raising his head and speaking with some little appearance of resentment, "that won't do at all, . . . that way of looking at it won't. I told you that I had done what I thought was right, when, perhaps, it was not right. Maybe I am sorry it was done, or maybe I am not sorry. But fair play is fair play. I didn't lead your brother into anything. He knew what he was doing as well—ah, better a deal—than I knew. He knew all about it. We acted together, he for his purposes, and I for mine. You don't suppose that he did what he did

merely for love of me, and to gratify my wish?"

"Well, that is exactly what I understand to have been the case from my nephew, Ikey," returned Mr. Batt, with frank innocence.

"Your nephew Ikey!" rejoined Cornland with a tone of extreme contempt. "When you come to know as much of your nephew as I do you will understand better how much trust to put in his words."

"Well, I don't know that I do put much trust in his words for that matter; but he showed me the paper that had been taken out of the register. There was no mistake about that," said Ben.

"No! You don't say so! To think of his having that paper with him! What could have been his purpose in bringing it here? He must have had some object in view! You don't suppose he has carried that bit of paper about with him all these years? Besides, how came *he* to have it, and not his father? That paper must have been brought here to make mischief in some way or other," said the farmer.

"It don't look unlike it, I confess. And to tell you the plain truth, Mr. Cornland, I don't

think this nevvv of mine has any great love for you and yours," said Mr. Batt.

"And yet, I'm sure neither he nor his father ever had anything but kindness from me and mine," returned Mr. Cornland.

"If he knew any way to make that falsification of the register into a rod for you, without hurting his own father, you may take my word for it he would lose no time in using it," said Mr. Batt.

"And you would not lend your hand, would you, Mr. Batt, to help him in such a purpose? You would not wish to turn what was done twenty years ago into a weapon against me?" remonstrated the farmer.

"Not I, Mr. Cornland, not I. If I had made it my business in life to run a muck against all I've seen done contrary to law, I might have made that my life's work, for I should have had no time to attend to any other. Besides, I have every reason to feel kindly to you and yours, seeing that I have never received aught but kindness from you. No, sir, I've no wish but that there may be as little trouble as may be. *But . . .* I think, you see, that we must put the matter straight."

"And, . . . meaning as kindly as I'm sure you do, what . . . would you propose should be done in the matter, then?" asked the farmer.

"Well, I should say, just tell the boys. Tell 'em you thought it best that Charles should hold the place of the eldest, because he was the strongest, and more fit to protect his brother than his brother to protect him, but that it was time now to put them in their right places. Of course there will be disappointment and discontent . . . *that* comes of putting things wrong; but that's what I should do," said Mr. Batt, with considerable decision of manner.

"And would you have any objection to tell me, Mr. Batt, what you would do in the matter of my brother's money, if I was to take your advice and tell the boys the real state of the case?" asked Cornland.

"Not at all; of course I should tell you. I think I have made up my mind. I know now the real state of the case, as you say, with respect to the position of the boys, and I think I know by this time something about the lads themselves. Let's see how it would

be. If Peter inherits his grandfather's ten thousand pounds, I suppose you would leave to Charles what you have yourself?"

"What I have to leave myself is mainly the capital used in working this farm and invested in the stock on it; but I could not carry it on advantageously as I do, and live as I do, without help from the interest of old Stanton's money," returned the farmer.

"There is what Miss Jemina, your sister has. I suppose that would go to Charles?" asked Mr. Batt.

"It is in her own disposition. No doubt you may consider that as certainly going to Charlie," replied Mr. Cornland.

"So that upon the whole, as things stand now, if Peter had all the Stanton money, and Charlie all the Cornland money, they would be about equally provided for?" said Mr. Batt.

"Not quite that. In that case Peter would have ten thousand pounds sure and certain, and Charlie would have about eight thousand, perhaps, *if* things went well," returned the farmer.

"Not quite equal, but not very far out—

very well. Now that being so, what ought I to do? To speak plain, and tell you the truth, Mr. Cornland, I don't see any reason for the preference you seem to feel for Charles over Peter. I don't say anything against Charlie, but I like Peter. I'm not sure that John Cornland, if he were alive and here, as I wish with all my heart he was, might not leave all his money to his eldest nephew. People have strange fancies sometimes; and the fact is, that Peter is more like your brother in face and manner than Charles is. I like Peter, and I think his uncle would have liked him; nevertheless, I don't think I ought to be guided by a whim of that sort, not unless I was sure that he would have wished it. For myself, I have not much opinion of what people call making eldest sons. If I had a dozen sons they would be all alike to me; I think, therefore, taking it all in all, that I shall not do wrong by dividing their uncle's money equally between them. Peter, who is the eldest, will then be a little better off than his brother, but not much; and both of them will have quite enough to make them comfortable. What do you say to that?"

"I've nothing to say against it, Mr. Batt : in fact, I don't see that you could do better any way," replied the farmer, who, indeed, was as well contented as he could have been by any other plan, save that of settling all the money there was upon Charles, which was what he would have liked to do.

"Well, then," said Mr. Batt, "let us send for the boys, and tell them."

"What, now directly ! to-night !" cried the farmer, who was hardly prepared for such immediateness, and not unnaturally shrank from telling his sons what he had to tell them.

"Yes, to-night ; why not to-night ? And there are particular reasons why it should be done to-night. You heard what Charlie was saying just now about going over to Mrs. Nisbett's to-morrow. Well, you know what he is going for. He is going to ask that girl to marry him. Don't you see that it may make a bushel of fresh difficulties if he goes and asks her, supposing himself the elder brother ?"

"That is true," said the farmer, reluctantly.

“Well, then, I’ll just go and call them,” returned Ben.

“Wait a minute,” pleaded the farmer.

“It’ll be that before they are here,” said Ben, going to the door to call the boys.

It *was* a minute, but not much more, before the two boys came into the room,—Charlie first, and Peter, following, of course, looking very much surprised at the summons.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. BATT THINKS.



R. CORNLAND was standing on the rug with his back to the fire. Mr. Batt came in with the two boys, and took his seat in a Windsor chair at the corner of the chimney. The boys remained standing, looking from their father to Ben, and wondering what was going to come next.

There was a minute's pause.

Ben Batt held his peace, and glanced up at the farmer.

"You were thinking, Charlie," began the latter, clearing his throat with a "hem" of a little huskiness, "you were talking of going over to Mrs. Nisbett's to-morrow morning. I

suppose it was not to see Mrs. Nisbett that you were going, eh?"

"No, not to see Mrs. Nisbett," said Charlie, colouring up, and hesitating a little before he continued, "but I didn't doubt, father, that you knew"

"Yes, of course I know. I have never attempted or wished to interfere in the matter, and it has all been sufficiently open and above board to give you the right to say that if I had any objection to Miss Millicent Stilwinche for a daughter-in-law, I ought to have said so before now. I have no such objection at all. But, my dear boys," here the farmer's voice grew a little husky again, and he had to clear his throat for the second time.

"There is a matter which has to be spoken about I've been wanting to talk to you both for some time, but things get put off from day to day specially when they are not pleasant but now before you ask for this young lady's hand it is necessary that that you should be made aware of certain circumstances."

Here Mr. Cornland paused a minute; and the boys now thoroughly frightened, looked

wonderingly at each other, at Mr. Batt, and at their father. Charles especially, from having his cheeks all ablaze became very pale. Mr. Batt nodded at the lads in a manner that was meant to be encouraging, but said no word. At last after an effort the farmer proceeded.

"You see, Peter," he began, and Peter quite started at the sound of his name, so unprepared was he for the possibility that *he* could have any leading part to play in the matter, be it what it might, that was coming. . . . "You see, Peter, when you were born, you were such a weany, poor, sickly little thing, that nobody thought you would live. Your poor mother made sure she would never rear you. But when Charlie came, he was just as strong, and likely as you were the reverse."

The boys looked at each other. Peter sidled up to the side of his brother, and Charlie put his arm over Peter's shoulder. Mr. Cornland, making another effort proceeded.

"That being so, you see, we thought . . . your poor dear mother, your aunt, and all of us . . . that it seemed as if Charlie were more like the elder brother, and you Peter

more like the younger, don't you see. And so we thought that we would let it stand so but the real fact is that Peter was born first."

There was a pause of dead silence for a minute or two. Charles became crimson over all his face and forehead, and gently removed his arm from around his brother's neck. But Peter nestled still more closely up to his side, and put his arm round his brother's waist. But neither of them said any word.

"After all, you see, my dear boys, it don't make much difference which is the oldest, and which is the youngest. Fortunately it don't make much difference. It might have made a difference, but as it is it won't make any difference to speak of. Your grandfather, you see, your poor mother's father that is, chose to settle his property so that your mother's fortune of ten thousand pounds should eventually go to my eldest son. And that ten thousand pounds therefore will be Peter's."

"It can't be mine against my own will, I suppose, father," said Peter—"It was always understood that it was to go to Charlie. And I won't have it."

"Don't be in such a hurry, Peter. Wait till you have heard what I have to say," rejoined his father, holding up his opened hand.

"If all that was your mother's fortune goes to one brother," continued Mr. Cornland, now speaking with greater ease, "it is no more than fair and right that all I have to leave should go to the other brother. Now I think that my substance may be put at something like eight thousand pounds—and that will be for Charles—something less, but not so very much less than what will come to Peter. You see, boys?"

"Yes, father, I see," said Charles still pale, and evidently much and painfully cast down by what he had heard. But he had quietly replaced his arm around his brother's neck. Peter said never a word.

"But you must observe, boys," resumed the farmer, "that though you are both of you thus provided for, as one may say, this provision would not come to either of you till after my death—neither your grandfather Stanton's money to Peter, nor what I have to Charles. And this is an important part of the matter,

when it comes to be a question of marrying. But then there is your poor uncle's money. It cannot be expected that you should grieve for the death of a person whom you never saw. And you may fairly consider yourselves fortunate in such a windfall. Now our friend Mr. Batt here, was entrusted by your uncle on his death bed, with the whole of his fortune, that he might give it to one of you two boys, or divide it between you, just as he might think fit. It is wholly in his hands to do as he thinks best with. And his intention is to divide the property—it amounts to twenty thousand pounds—equally between you. And this money will be at your own disposition immediately on your coming of age. So that, you see, either of you are in a position to ask the hand of any lady who can be content to live on the proceeds of ten thousand pounds immediately, together with the prospect of as much, or nearly as much more . . . some day. And I don't think that you can consider yourselves, either of you, as very unfortunately circumstanced young gentlemen either," said the farmer, concluding his communication in a much

more cherry tone than he had commenced it in.

"Please father, may I speak now," said Peter.

"Of course you may, my dear boy. But I would advise you to think the matter over a little before you make any remarks on it," said the farmer—"eh? Mr. Batt?" he added, turning to Ben who had been very attentive to all that had passed, but had remained perfectly silent the whole time.

"Let's hear what Peter has to say," said Mr. Batt thus appealed to. "It isn't as if we were in a court of justice, you know. What we want is to talk the matter over, isn't it? So, if your father is agreeable, I should like to hear Peter's notions of the subject."

"Very good. What have you got in your mind, Peter, my boy? What's your opinion of the matter?" said the farmer, not, however, very willingly.

"I was going to say, father, that I think it was the wisest thing that could have been done to make Charlie the eldest. I should be quite lost as elder brother. It would be quite contrary to . . . to . . . to

everything. And my notion is that it would be far best—best for all and for everybody to leave things just as they are,” said Peter flushing crimson up to the roots of his black stubbly hair, and pressing himself closer to Charlie’s side as he spoke.

“I’m glad any way,” said the farmer, putting out his hand to Peter, while a drop of moisture gathered in his eye, “that you do not feel, Peter, my dear boy, that much wrong has been done you—that you do not feel unhappy about it. Perhaps after all, it’s Charles that has the most reason to think that he has been ill-used.”

“I would rather have known the truth,” said Charles shortly, and speaking in a very low voice.

“I wish that you had always known it, Charles,” said the farmer; “like many another who has thought he was acting for the best, I suppose I was doing just the worse. I wish it had not been so.”

“But if it *was* for the best, father? Why should not everything be just as it always was? Charlie and I shall never get to feel any other

way, if we were to live for an hundred years," urged Peter.

"Why, you see how it is, boys. 'Tis like most other things in the world, so far as I can see. It don't depend altogether only on ourselves. Now look at this business about your grandfather Stanton's money. He willed that the eldest of you two should have it. And there ain't nobody on earth that can do any other ways than let the eldest have it. Not Lawyer Sylvester himself could make out that to be any other ways—to the best of my belief," added Mr. Batt, thus judiciously qualifying the expression of his doubts of the lawyer's omnipotence.

"But surely nobody—neither grandfather himself, nor all the lawyers, can make me have the money, if I won't have it," said Peter, stoutly.

This seemed rather a poser for Mr. Batt. He scratched his head in much doubt and perplexity.

"Well, I can't say. I don't know justly how that may be. I can't call to mind that I ever did hear of anybody as was forced by law to have ten thousand pounds against his

will. But it's my opinion the lawyers 'ud make you take it," said Mr. Batt, nodding his head gravely, as his mind settled down into this conclusion.

"But if it's mine, I may give it away. And I certainly won't keep it. I consider it's Charlie's by right," said Peter resolutely.

"As you say, my boy, if it is yours, nothing can prevent you from giving it away. You are free to give it your brother, if you think fit to do so. But you can make no disposal of it in any way till you are of full age. When you are, you may do with it—that is, with the reversion of it, for you cannot touch the money till after my death—whatever you think fit," said Mr. Cornland.

"Can't I sign any paper, or do any thing to bind myself and settle the matter at once?" asked Peter ruefully.

"No, you cannot; no more than a baby in arms. The law considers you all one as a baby in arms, till you are of full age. I know that much of law, anyway," said the farmer.

"It is a pity I did not die when father says I seemed so like to die. There would have been no trouble then," said Peter, with a sigh

"Don't talk in that way. I won't have that, old fellow. How should I do without you, I should like to know?" said Charles, stooping his head till his cheek rested on Peter's forehead.

"You won't want me when you are married, Charlie, you know," said his brother, looking up with a tear and a smile contending for the mastery of his face.

"Shan't I though! Shan't I though! Married or single, you and I will never part, I can tell you, Peter. And any girl that loves me well enough to marry me, will have to understand that," said Charles, with considerably more warmth than he had before spoken.

"But how will it be when you get a wife for yourself, Peter?" said Mr. Batt. "You must think of that, and so must Charlie."

"*I* get a wife! I don't think that's very likely, Mr. Batt. Why, who would have *me*, I should like to know, if I wanted them, which I don't?" said Peter, very energetically.

"Who'd have you! Why there's a many would jump at you. Not to go far to look, there's one in this very house. Miss Barbara

would have you in half a minute," said Mr. Batt, with a very comical look in his face.

"Oh, good gracious!" cried Peter, with a sudden shudder. "I am sure she wouldn't do any thing of the kind. She'd be more likely to scratch your eyes out for saying such a thing," added Peter, smiling in his turn.

"Yes, I dare say she would. But it's true all the same. Just you try her," said Mr. Batt.

"Thank you, Mr. Batt. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather try a dose of arsenic," said Peter, quietly.

"Well, I don't know, but I think perhaps on the whole you'd be right," said Mr. Batt, with an air of seriously balancing the two alternatives. "Still you are too young, by a bit, to undertake to say but what you'll feel inclined to take a wife one of these days. Anyway those whose business it is to have any eye to your future, are bound to look to the likelihood of your wanting to do so sooner or later," said Mr. Batt, speaking seriously.

"I am quite convinced that I never shall. I have often thought about it, and I've always

thought the same. I am sure that I shall live and die an old bachelor—that is, if I live to be old at all,” returned Peter, with all seriousness; “but as I can’t persuade anybody else of that as surely as I am sure of it, if I may, Mr. Batt, I’ll tell you what I was thinking.”

“Do tell us, Peter, my boy. Let us hear it by all means,” said Ben.

“Well, Charlie is going to be married very soon—at least he hopes so, and we all hope so. Certainly I am not going to be married at present. You will allow that much. Now since this money of grandpapa Stanton’s must come to me, as you tell me, but not till after the death of my father, would you, if I consent to have that when it comes, would you now at once give Charlie all poor Uncle John’s money, so that he might have it to marry on? That’s what I was thinking,” said Peter.

“Oh, Peter, Peter, no fellow ever had such a brother as you, whether elder or younger. You are too generous, too noble,” said Charles, with an expansion of feeling that was not usual with him.

“Not a bit of it. Ah, you don’t see how

I'm looking out for number one. You don't see that I'm bargaining to be taken care of, and to stick to you like a burr all my life. You'll never get rid of me," said Peter, with his head nestling against his brother's breast.

Mr. Batt had remained silent the while, apparently in deep meditation.

"Well, Mr. Batt, sir, what do you say to Peter's proposal?" said the farmer.

"I'm a thinking," said Mr. Batt.

There was a longish pause of complete silence, and then the farmer said, "Well, Mr. Batt."

"Peter is a trump, and no mistake," said Mr. Batt.

"But you have been thinking something else besides that, I hope, Mr. Batt?" said Peter.

"Yes. It don't take much thinking to be sure of that. But I am thinking of some other things besides that. And I must have a bit more time to think. My notion is that we had all better go to bed now. And if Charlie will take my advice, he will put off his visit to Miss Millicent for a little bit—or at least put off saying anything about his

own position. Will you be ruled so far by me?"


"Yes, I will, Mr. Batt. When I made up my mind to go to Mrs. Nesbitt's to-morrow morning I did not know . . . many things that I know now. I did not expect that I should be able to say anything about . . . about my position, as you say," returned Charles.

"Well, in a day or two, perhaps, you will be able to say something not unsatisfactory; but I must have a bit to think," repeated Mr. Batt.

So Ben's motion for an adjournment was carried, and the little party broke up and went to their beds, . . . though it may be well supposed that talking rather than sleeping occupied the two brothers for the next two or three hours.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

HE next morning Mr. Batt said he was again going up to the hall, and this time he told his son that he might, if he liked, come with him, an invitation which Ben the younger was not slow to jump at. No doubt all young Ben's mind and heart were filled with the image of Beatrice to the exclusion of all else. And it may with equal certainty be imagined that if the thoughts of Ben the elder ranged over a wider extent, a considerable portion of them centred on Pen. And it will easily be believed by those who by this time understand the sort of terms on which young Ben and his father lived, that much talk passed be-

tween them on their walk, on the subjects thus occupying their hearts, but nothing passed to prevent young Ben's astonishment, when, on arriving at the hall, his father, instead of making any inquiry for any of the ladies, left him to find his way to the object of his visit as best he might, and requested himself to be shown in to Mr. Stilwinche.

It cannot be said that either Beatrice or her lover found the hours other than winged ; but as the morning wore away, and nothing more was heard of Mr. Batt, the length of his visit to Mr. Stilwinche seemed strange. More than once the servant had been interrogated, and the reply still was that Mr. Batt was still with Mr. Stilwinche, in that gentleman's study.

Then tidings came from that sacred apartment to the effect that "master had ordered the gig," and it was believed that he was going to drive Mr. Batt to Petheram. And then a few minutes later came a message from Mr. Batt to his son, desiring him to tell them at Coppleford that he should not be at home till the following day.

And then two bright young faces, framed

in the interstices of a muslin curtain, which discreetly veiled all the non-cherubic portions of the figures to which the faces were attached, saw from the same pane of glass their two papas side by side in the gig, depart, as James reported, for Petheram; and Mr. Stilwinche, too, was not to be expected home that night.

Here was material for speculation both at the hall and at Coppleford. Not even Ikey could form a guess what might be the meaning of these strange occurrences.

Nor was the curiosity of either the family at Coppleford or that at the hall in any degree satisfied when the two gentlemen on the following evening returned from London by the late train. Mr. Batt, indeed, admitted that he had brought his meditations to a conclusion; and Mr. Stilwinche told his family that he trusted he had done for the best. But both gentlemen declined giving any further explanation of the business they had transacted together till a few days should have elapsed. In all probability Miss Pen was excepted from this decree of secrecy. It may be surmised that both Mr. Stilwinche and Mr. Batt took

her into their confidence. But if it was so, Miss Pen shewed herself quite worthy of her future husband's confidence—for "the young people," though aware that some mystery was hatching itself, learned nothing of its nature from Miss Pen. No doubt also Mr. Cornland had some private colloquies with Mr. Batt. But whatever was the substance of these, the head of the Copleford family kept it to himself.

During the days that this mystery remained unexplained, Mr. Batt paid Mr. Stilwinche many visits in his study at the hall. And in the course of the same time the sundry couples of the young folks had come to a satisfactory understanding with each other. Mr. Benjamin Batt, senior, and Miss Pen had settled *their* affairs in the most business-like manner, as the reader is aware. Ben, the younger, and Beatrice—to speak of the ladies in due order of precedence—had found very little difficulty in coming to a perfect understanding. Beatrice had fully made up her mind to the step of accompanying her husband to Australia, there to put her own little fortune, together with such assist-

ance as Ben's father might be able to give him, to the best profit Ben's activity might be able to make of it. But she was not sorry to agree with her lover that his father's munificence made such a separation from all the old home ties unnecessary.

Augustus Fitzwilliam had the infinite delight of seeing the roses in his pretty Maggie's cheeks bloom again with the consciousness that henceforward the course of their true love was to run smooth. Mrs. Fitzwilliam was minded, if the thing was to be done, to "do it handsome," and it was done very handsomely indeed. Maggie became by far the richest of the sisters; but as, truth to tell, she was, as has been hereinbefore intimated, the least endowed with intelligence, this was all according to the usual and proper order of things, and Nature's ordinary compensatory mode of arranging matters. She was at all events quite brilliant enough in intellect to suit her husband, who always looked up to her as a wonder of sense and judgment. He always felt that she could give no more convincing proof of those qualities than by truly and faithfully loving him.

And how could she doubt that so fond a husband was indeed a man of men? Their love-making, the clever folks may assure themselves, was to the full as romantic and delightful in all respects as that of any of the others; for any amount of "romance" may be generated out of an infinitesimal quantity of brain power, provided abundance of heart power be not wanting—just as you may make excellent grog if you have spirit enough, even though very short of lemon. Many young wives treasure up the bridal veil which they wore at the altar, but Maggie for many a year treasured a *souvenir* which, though less elegant, had more significance for her, the real blue apron which Augustus had veritably bought as a first step towards his notable plan of supporting his wife as a market gardener.

Charlie and Milly were the handsomest couple of the party; but there is no reason for thinking that they were at all happier than the others on that account, but Charlie maintained to the last that the "free and happy barley" was the queen among them all, and Milly continued to be often called by the

household soubriquet of "Barley" long years after everybody but herself and her husband had forgotten the origin of it.

But in nothing of all this is there any explanation of the secret which had certainly been hatching between Mr. Batt and Mr. Stilwinche. Any reader of these pages who may happen to be acquainted with a recent account of the "landed gentry" of Sussex will probably imagine that he knows all about the secret already; but he will be mistaken, for the usual statement is that "the lands of Combe Mavis passed into this family (Batt) from the ancient family of the Stilwinches by marriage." Such, however, was not the case. The plan which Mr. Batt had proposed to Mr. Stilwinche was that he should become the purchaser of the estate—he and his son Ben together, and that he and Pen, and young Ben and Beatrice should continue to inhabit the hall, while Charles and Milly should continue to reside at Coppleford. Mr. Stilwinche, who was as strongly as ever convinced that it was "easy for a man who had capital at command to do for the best," jumped at the proposal, and for many years afterwards might

have been seen drawing his shoulders up to his ears, and apparently struggling to get his head above his shirt-collar, as he would stand of a forenoon on the flagstones in front of the "Athenæum" at Petheram, a much happier man, than he had ever stood on his own hearth-rug at Combe Mavis.

Mr. Batt had had a fancy that the consummation of his plan should be declared at a general meeting of all the parties interested in the arrangement. And a day had been appointed for that purpose, when they were all to meet in that dining room at Combe Mavis, in which the reader was first introduced to the Stilwinches. The day and the hour arrived, and all the party were assembled in eager expectation of hearing the secret which had been kept a secret so long. But just as Mr. Stilwinche was about to commence the little speech, which he had prepared with much care, somebody observed that Miss Barbara was absent. Mr. Cornland thought that she had walked over from Coppelford with his sister. Miss Jemima thought that she had walked with Charles and Millicent. There she was not. And nobody knew where

she was. The long and the short of it was—and it may here be stated in “the short,” for Miss Barbara has not probably awakened such an interest in the reader as to make it worth while to tell “the long” of the matter—the short then of it was that Miss Barbara had eloped with Ikey Batt! But why elope? Because Miss Barbara was in hourly fear that Ikey should discover the very small probability there was that she, Barbara, would be her Aunt’s heiress. And because the ingenuous Ikey had conceived the idea that at the solemn family meeting, when so much that had been secret was to be told, it was part of his uncle’s programme that all about the fraud respecting the Cornland boys’ ages, should come out. After all, Miss Barbara deceived the sharp and cunning Ikey much more than he deceived her in the matter of inducing each other to contract matrimony. For Ikey and his father really had scraped together a good deal of money; whereas no farthing of Mrs. Frampton’s money ever came to her niece Barbara. They neither of them deserved much good at the hand of fate; but it may be doubted whether either of them deserved so

dreadful a punishment as they, with life-long constancy, inflicted on each other.

Miss Pernel shared the retirement of her parents, in Petheram. She was soon led to see the awful nature of the dreadful soul-destroying darkness, in which her former friends, the vicar of Combe and his sister, were walking towards destruction. But having made her own election sure, she did not so much mind about it. She went to her grave, in Petheram churchyard, at a good old age, as "Pernel Stilwinche, spinster."

"Poor Peter," too, lived and died unmarried—a kind of lieutenant of his brother's. He was the dearly loved uncle,—the friend,—the Providence of no end of nephews and nieces; and probably if the question "who could least be spared out of their circle?" had been decided ballot-wise, by all the inmates of Combe Hall and Coppelford Farm, it would have been found that "Uncle Peter" was the most indispensable to the general happiness.

THE END.





the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased by 1.5 million, from 2.5 million in 1980 to 4 million in 1998. The public sector has become a major employer in the UK, and its growth has been a key factor in the overall growth of the economy.

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